



Austin Independent School District

Department of Program Evaluation

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EXTERNAL RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT: 2006–2007

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) maintains a formal application and review process that facilitates research and evaluation conducted by external parties and allows the External Research Coordinator (ERC) to monitor these projects. The process was developed to (a) protect students and staff from unnecessary or overly burdensome data collection; (b) ensure compliance with privacy laws (e.g., the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 [FERPA], the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPPA], the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment [PPRA]) and ethical guidelines concerning research with human participants; and (c) contribute to the quality of research conducted in AISD.

Proposals are received and reviewed for methodological soundness, including a review of all measures and consent forms to be used. After measures and forms have been received and deemed appropriate, the ERC convenes a committee of three administrative reviewers. In general, the review committee includes (a) one reviewer from the Department of Program Evaluation (DPE), who provides an extensive review of the proposed measures and research methods; (b) one administrator with expertise in the proposed subject area (e.g., the administrative supervisor for music curriculum, if the proposal concerns music education); and (c) an administrator with sufficient perspective regarding the current depth and breadth of campus responsibilities to make an informed recommendation regarding which campuses might be able to accommodate the project (e.g., the associate superintendent for high schools).

If the approved proposal requires the use of existing data that are not available via a public information request, the ERC will facilitate the drafting of a data-sharing agreement between the district and the external party that is in compliance with FERPA. The Office of the General Counsel and the superintendent must approve all data-sharing agreements. The AISD board of trustees also must approve any data-sharing agreements that are associated with district expenses in excess of \$50,000 or in which the other party is another local, publicly funded institution (e.g., Austin Community College, The University of Texas).

The following summary describes the overall percentage of proposals accepted; the types of groups and individuals who submit proposals; and trends among topic areas, grade levels, and staff and student groups. This report also addresses administrative considerations, accomplishments to date, and recommendations for the coming school year.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

EXTERNAL RESEARCH PROPOSAL APPROVAL RATE

Between April 27, 2006 and May 7, 2007, AISD received 107 applications to conduct research and evaluation in the district. Of these, 79% were approved for implementation; 13% were declined; and 8% withdrawn, or assumed to be withdrawn, because of inactivity. Of the 14 proposals that were declined, 5 could not be supported due to conflicts with ongoing district initiatives or curricula; 4 were too demanding in terms of staff or student time; 2 did not provide adequate student privacy protection; 1 was market, rather than educational, research; 1 was submitted too late in the year to be properly implemented; and 1 had a poor research and survey design.

In contrast, the studies that were approved generally fit well with ongoing district initiatives and curricula. Also, they were of smaller scale, used existing data, and/or were less demanding of student and staff time than were the proposals that were declined. Researchers who withdrew proposals often did so in response to initial questions from the ERC or from the review committee that elucidated problems with the research or data collection plan that would require considerable revision of the proposal.

Table 1. Proposals Accepted, Declined, or Withdrawn, by Applicant Type

Applicant type	% Accepted	% Declined	% Withdrawn
AISD employee (n = 4)	75%	25%	0%
Community group (n =14)	64% (69%)	29% (31%)	7%
Government agency (n = 6)	100%	0%	0%
Research firm (n = 24)	71% (77%)	21% (23%)	8%
University faculty (n = 16)	88% (92%)	7% (8%)	0%
University student (n = 43)	84% (92%)	7% (8%)	9%
TOTAL (n = 107)	79% (86%)	13% (14%)	8%

Source. AISD external research database

Note. The numbers in parentheses represent the percentage approved or declined, exclusive of those that were withdrawn from consideration.

As noted in Table 1, a small number of research proposals were received from district employees. Employees are not required to submit proposals for research that is conducted as part of their regular work (e.g., a survey conducted at the end of a professional development course). However, employees who wish to conduct research for the purpose of writing an article for professional publication, completing a thesis or dissertation, or providing data to an external entity must complete the application and review process to ensure adherence to ethical and legal

standards and the use of appropriate methodology. Employees who submitted proposals for their research as graduate students are included in Table 1 as university students, rather than as AISD employees.

PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED AND RESEARCH METHODS USED

Of the 85 proposals that were approved, the largest percentage involved only student participants (38%), followed by projects that involved only teachers (24%). Researchers most commonly used quantitative methods (42%) or a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (32%; see Table 2). Although students were frequently the participating group, in most cases the research did not result in a loss of instructional time or a direct student data collection burden. Quite often, existing student records were used to evaluate student performance after participation in a particular curricular or community based intervention. In these cases, either students’ families had given active consent to share records as a prerequisite to program participation, or the records were deidentified and shared via a data-sharing agreement drafted in accordance with FERPA. Unfortunately, the precise extent to which students were directly involved in data collection cannot be determined easily from the information currently available. Beginning with the 2007–2008 school year, information will be collected in a way that allows for quick assessment of the number of staff, student, and parent participants and the time each was required to participate.

Table 2. Proposals Involving Various Participant Groups, by Basic Methodology

Participant group	% Qualitative	% Quantitative	% Both
Students (n = 32)	16%	63%	22%
Teachers (n =20)	30%	40%	30%
Student and teacher (n = 10)	45%	15%	40%
Teachers and administrators (n = 10)	30%	40%	30%
Other participants or participant combinations (n = 13)	15%	38%	46%
TOTAL (n = 85)	26%	42%	32%

Source. AISD external research database

Note. “Other participants” included parents only and administrators only. “Other participant combinations” included various configurations of these groups (e.g., parents, teachers, and administrators).

The basic methodology for the external research projects implemented during 2006–2007 varied somewhat by researcher type (Table 3). Government agencies and research firms were most likely to submit proposals for research that used only quantitative methods (e.g., surveys or requests for existing data); AISD employees and university students were most likely to use qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, class observations); and university faculty were most likely

to submit proposals that used a combination of methods (e.g., teacher survey and review lesson plans funds).

Table 3. Projects Using Qualitative and/or Quantitative Methods, by Researcher Type

Researcher type	% Qualitative	% Quantitative	% Both
AISD employees (n = 3)	67%	33%	0%
Community group (n = 9)	11%	56%	33%
Government agency (n = 6)	0%	83%	17%
Research firm (n = 17)	6%	59%	35%
University faculty (n = 14)	14%	14%	71%
University student (n = 36)	44%	36%	19%
TOTAL (n = 85)	26%	42%	32%

Source. AISD external research database

DATA SHARING AGREEMENTS

Occasionally, approved projects require access to quantitative data that are collected by the district, but for which researchers realistically cannot collect active consent from all participants (e.g., an external evaluation of a district-wide initiative). Under these circumstances, the ERC drafts a data-sharing agreement in collaboration with the external party. This agreement delineates the variables required to conduct the research or evaluation, specifies the length of time the external party may have access to the data, and stipulates how the data may be used. Upon approval by AISD’s Office of the General Counsel and the superintendent and/or the board of trustees, the ERC shares a data file that has been stripped of any information that potentially could be used to identify individuals.

Until the second semester of 2006–2007, the ERC occasionally also was responsible for drafting data-sharing agreements with external parties (e.g., for implementation of a web-based math program) who required access to student data for short periods of time. In this case, the ERC ensured that the student data were secure while in transit to the external service provider. However, a favorable collaboration between the Office of the General Counsel, DPE, Management Information Systems, and Network Systems and Support resulted in the ability of Management Information Systems staff to draft data-sharing agreements that are reviewed and approved via a shared Lotus-Notes-based data-sharing agreement tracking system. The new system allows for the efficient review and approval of agreements by administrative reviewers and the Office of the General Counsel, and shared access to an electronic database of all data-sharing agreements. Thus, since Spring 2007, Management Information Systems has provided a staff counterpart to the ERC. As a result, the role of drafting data-sharing agreements is assigned according to the purpose of the agreement.

Between June 2006 and May 2007, 22% of data-sharing agreements (n = 6) were drafted to protect data elements required by service providers and thus fell under the responsibility of the

Management Information Systems ERC counterpart. The other agreements were drafted for the purpose of conducting research or evaluation (56%) or to provide data access to consultants who were assisting with district initiatives (15%; e.g., High School Redesign). Two agreements that are best described as non-disclosure agreements also were prepared.

Table 4. Data-Sharing Agreements Initiated in 2006-2007, by Purpose

Purpose of agreement	Number of agreements
Program evaluation	8
Research	7
Protect data elements shared with service providers	6
External support of district initiatives	4
Non-disclosure with government agencies	2
TOTAL	27

Source. AISD data-sharing agreement database

TOPIC AREAS AND GRADE LEVELS

Proposals that were approved in the 2006–2007 school year covered a broad range of grade levels and research topics. The majority of projects involved topics that exclusively concerned the elementary (29%) or the high school level (29%), regardless of participant type. Studies involving mixed grade levels or all grade levels were less common (5% to 15%; see Table 5).

Table 5. Grade Level Focus for Accepted Projects

Topic area	Number of projects
Elementary only (early childhood – grade 5)	25
Elementary and middle school	4
Middle school only (grades 6 – 8)	9
Middle and high school	9
High school only (grades 9 – 12)	25
All levels	13
TOTAL	85

Source. AISD external research database

Projects also were categorized according to research topic (e.g., literacy, bilingual education). The research application contained an open-ended item concerning the topic of study; thus, a rather extensive list of proposal topics was recoded into several broad categories (Table 6). The most common topic areas of study included curriculum and instruction for core

subject areas and student social or emotional development, each representing 32% of approved studies. A total of 24% of studies also examined student achievement.

Table 6. Approved Projects, by Research Topic Category

Topic area	Number of projects
Curriculum and instruction – core subject areas	27
Student social or emotional development	27
Academic achievement	20
Teacher preparation	16
Bilingual education	12
Ethnic or cultural studies	12
Other topics	11
At-risk students	10
Professional practice – teachers	10
Supplemental programs	10
College readiness	8
Physical health or safety	8
Professional development opportunities– teachers	7
Curriculum and instruction – non-core areas	6
Special education	6
Education policy/leadership	5
TOTAL	85

Source. AISD external research database

Note. The number of projects by category does not sum to the number of approved proposals for the school year (N = 85) because as many as three topic areas could be recorded for each proposal.

SUMMARY OF SUCCESSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DATA-SHARING AGREEMENT TRACKING SYSTEM AND DATABASE

- The cross-department collaboration on the development and implementation of the Lotus-Notes-based data-sharing agreement tracking system and database was the most notable success of the 2006–2007 school year. This system can serve as a model for paperless communication and shared electronic access to information.
- The ERC should consider more systematic recording of information about the data-sharing agreements that are drafted, so that future reports will include more detail about the persons and organizations with whom data are shared, the types of data shared, and the broad purposes of these agreements.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH APPLICATION PROCESS, DATABASE, AND FUTURE SUMMARY REPORTS

- Informal feedback from applicants and district administrators indicates that the AISD external research application and review process is reasonably convenient, that requirements and priorities are clear, that forms are easily accessed on the AISD website, and that the ERC is available to answer questions and address concerns that arise.
- A few areas within the application and review process could be improved to increase efficiency. For example, drawing upon questions frequently asked by new applicants, the ERC will develop an overview of the research application and review process for interested faculty and students at The University of Texas. This presentation will be developed in consultation with the superintendent and his cabinet and with the staff of The University of Texas Research Support and Compliance Office.
- A list of external research priorities will be created to reflect board priorities, the priorities of the superintendent and his cabinet, and the current external research projects.
- Based on the success of the data-sharing agreement tracking system, the ERC will explore movement toward a paperless research application and review process. If the district's Office of Accountability supports such a change, the ERC will initiate a request for the development of this system, to be undertaken in collaboration with the appropriate staff in Management Information Systems.
- The ERC should update the existing database so future summary reports can offer more detailed information about the research conducted in the district than is currently available. Specifically, the ERC should record the number of participants and the time required of each participant, so that future summary reports can detail the individual and overall district burden of research participation in terms of person hours or days per year.
- The ERC also should record information regarding the particular departments and campuses involved in external research projects to determine if particular work groups or campuses are distracted from their primary responsibilities because of excessive research participation requirements.
- The ERC also should improve the external research database by clearly defining, in advance, a limited number of broad research topic categories, so that applicants will be able to specify their topic according to consistent definitions, and so that the ERC can report which research topics are most common and which topics should be considered priorities in the future.

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