



Austin Independent School District

Department of Program Evaluation

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Cathy Malerba, Ph.D.
Angelica Ware Herrera, Ph.D.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT: 2008–2009

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) has a formal application and review process that facilitates research and evaluation conducted by external parties and allows external research coordinators (ERCs) 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], Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPPA], and 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 proposed project focuses on music education); and (c) an administrator who has 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 and for which parents have not provided active, written consent, the ERC will facilitate the drafting of a data-sharing agreement that is signed by the district and the external party and 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 types of groups and individuals who submit proposals; the overall percentage of proposals accepted in 2008–2009; and trends among topic areas, grade levels, and the staff and student groups most often involved in the research. This report also

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addresses administrative considerations, accomplishments to date, and recommendations for the current school year.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The following sections present information covering various aspects of external research, including the external research proposal approval rate in 2008–2009, participant categories or types, time required for the research projects, topic areas and grade levels studied, data-sharing agreements, and a summary of successes and recommendations.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH PROPOSAL APPROVAL RATE

Between June 2008 and April 2009, AISD received 112 applications to conduct research and evaluation in the district. A significant proportion of the applications came from The University of Texas at Austin (38%); 23% were from other universities; and the remaining 39% were from government agencies, research firms, community groups, and AISD employees. Of the total number of applications, 61% were approved for implementation. Twenty-nine percent were withdrawn, or assumed to be withdrawn, because of inactivity; 9% were declined; and 1% requested a letter of support for a grant or funding opportunity. Of those applications declined, most were too demanding of staff or student time, and a few had a substantially flawed research and survey design.

In contrast, the studies that were approved generally fit well with ongoing district initiatives and curriculum. Also, compared to withdrawn and declined proposals, the approved proposals were of smaller scale, used existing data, and/or were less demanding of student and staff time. Researchers who withdrew proposals often did so in response to initial questions from the ERC or from the review committee because these questions 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
University students (n = 36)	69%	6%	25%
University faculty (n = 35)	66%	11%	23%
Research firms (n = 14)	43%	14%	43%
Government agencies (n = 8)	50%	0%	50%
Community groups (n = 7)	57%	14%	29%
AISD employees (n = 4)	75%	0%	25%
TOTAL (n = 112)	61%	9%	29%

Source. AISD external research database.

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 purposes 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.

PARTICIPANTS TYPES AND TIME REQUIREMENTS

Of the 68 proposals that were approved in 2008–2009, 38% involved only students, only teachers, or both groups (Table 2). This rate is lower than that reported in 2007–2008, when 58% of approved projects involved only students and teachers. It is important to note that although many projects have large samples of students and teachers, the participant burden often is minimized through the use observational methodologies or through the use of existing data. When existing district records are used, either students’ parents/guardians provide active consent or an ERC drafts a data-sharing agreement and the records are shared in accordance with FERPA.

Table 2. Approved Projects, by Participant Group, 2006–2007 and 2007–2008

Participant group	2006–2007 (n = 85)	2007–2008 (n = 88)	2008–2009 (n = 68)
Students only	38%	11%	13%
Teachers only	23%	22%	8%
Students and teachers	12%	25%	17%
Teachers and administrators	12%	1%	4%
Other participants or participant combinations	15%	41%	58%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%

Source. AISD external research database, *External Research Summary Report: 2006–2007*, and *External Research Summary Report: 2007–2008*

To provide accurate estimates of participant burden, ERCs track the number of participants and the amount of time required of participants for each project. On average, the most time was required of student and teacher participants; administrators and other non-teaching staff had the lowest average time requirements in 2008–2009 (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Information for Approved Projects, by Participant Group, 2008–2009

Participant group (number of projects)	Average number of participants	Range in number of participants	Average hours required per participant	Range of participation hours
Students (54)	229	0–4,881	3.60*	0–221
Parents (15)	48	0–1,000	1.32	0–45
Teachers (33)	8	0–130	5.54	0–200
Administrators (14)	>1	0–10	>1	0–18
Other staff (8)	1	0–27	>1	0–6

Source. AISD external research database.

Note. *This average excludes one project with over 100 hours of student shadowing.

TOPIC AREAS AND GRADE LEVELS

Upon entry into the external research database, projects are categorized into one or two broad research topics. As in 2007–2008, the most common topic areas in 2008–2009 were student academic achievement, student social or emotional development, and teacher professional practices (Table 4). It is important to note that topic area counts are not directly comparable across years because up to three topic areas could be selected in 2006–2007, whereas only two were recorded in 2007–2008 and 2008–2009.

Table 4. Number of Approved Projects, by Primary Research Topic Area, 2006–2007, 2007–2008, and 2008–2009

Topic area	2006–2007	2007–2008	2008–2009
Student social or emotional development	27	26	2
Curriculum and instruction—core subject areas	27	11	10
Academic achievement	20	13	13
Teacher professional practices	17	12	2
Physical health or safety	8	14	8
Professional development opportunities	7	4	0
Ethnic or cultural studies	12	9	1
College readiness	8	8	3
Educational policy or leadership	5	4	6
Supplemental programs	10	4	1
At-risk students	10	6	3
Bilingual education	12	4	0
Special education	6	2	1
Teacher preparation	16	7	2
Other (e.g., civic engagement, undocumented status, and college attainment)	10	20	16
TOTAL	195	144	68

Source. AISD external research database.

Note. The most common topic areas each year are indicated in bold.

Proposals also are categorized by their grade-level focus (Table 5). As in 2007–2008, the largest percentage of projects in 2008–2009 exclusively concerned the elementary level (29%), followed by those focused only at the high school level (22%). The approval rate for high school level proposals declined during the 2008–2009 school year, compared with the rate for the previous year. High school principals requested that fewer projects be approved because of the high demands on student, staff, and administrator time as a result of the high school redesign initiative and evaluation.

Table 5. Grade-Level Focus for Accepted Projects, 2006–2007 and 2007–2008

Topic area	2006–2007 Number and %	2007–2008 Number and %	2008–2009 Number and %
Elementary only (early childhood–grade 5)	25 (29%)	39 (44%)	20 (29%)
Elementary and middle school	4 (5%)	4 (4%)	2 (3%)
Middle school only (grades 6–8)	9 (11%)	9 (10%)	12 (18%)
Middle and high school	9 (11%)	3 (3%)	2 (3%)
High school only (grades 9–12)	25 (29%)	21 (24%)	15 (22%)
All levels	13 (15%)	11 (12%)	9 (13%)
District-level personnel only	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	8 (12%)
TOTAL	85 (100%)	89 (100%)	68 (100%)

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 cannot realistically collect active consent from all participants (e.g., an external evaluation of a district-wide initiative) or require data collection that would result in an excessive burden for campus staff (e.g., providing report cards for all students participating in a particular college readiness program). Under these circumstances, an ERC drafts a data-sharing agreement in collaboration with the external party to delineate the variables required to conduct the research or evaluation, specify the length of time the external party may have access to the data, and stipulate how the data may be used. Then, upon approval by AISD’s Office of the General Counsel and the superintendent or the board of trustees, an ERC shares a data file with the external party.

Since Spring 2007, AISD’s Department of Management Information Systems (MIS) has provided a staff counterpart to the ERCs; thus, the role of drafting data-sharing agreements can be assigned according to the purpose of the agreement. Between June 2008 and May 2009, 26% of data-sharing agreements were drafted for the purpose of protecting data elements accessed by external software service providers, and thus were the responsibility of the MIS counterpart. The majority of other agreements were drafted for the purposes of conducting research or evaluation

or to provide data to consultants who were assisting with the implementation and evaluation of district initiatives. Regardless of the purpose of data sharing, if access to AISD data systems is required, the external party must complete a security audit that is evaluated by the AISD Department of Network Systems and Support (NSS). In these cases, data are shared or access permitted only upon a favorable recommendation from NSS staff.

Table 6. Data-sharing Agreements, by Purpose, 2006–2007, 2007–2008, and 2008–2009

Purpose of agreement	2006–2007	2007–2008	2008–2009
Program evaluation	8	7	16
Research	7	12	17
Protect data elements shared with service providers	6	4	14
External support of district initiatives	4	5	3
Non-disclosure with government or other agencies	2	2	3
TOTAL	27	30	53

Source. AISD data-sharing agreement database.

SUMMARY OF OTHER ACTIVITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UPCOMING YEAR

DATA-SHARING AGREEMENT TRACKING SYSTEM AND DATABASE

- The shared Lotus Notes-based data-sharing agreement tracking system and database continue to be a notable success. The shared database greatly expedites communication between the DPE, MIS, NSS, and the Office of the General Counsel, and greatly reduces the amount of paper used to circulate document drafts and cover memos.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH APPLICATION PROCESS AND PROCEDURES

- The process of accepting applications and accompanying research materials electronically also was a success; applicants quickly adjusted to the new procedures. The shared use of the electronic inbox, externalresearch@austinisd.org, allowed the two ERCs to efficiently jointly monitor incoming applications and applicant communication. The electronic application process also greatly reduced the amount of storage space required to house paper versions of submitted materials.
- In Fall 2008, the ERCs visited the first general administrator meeting of the 2008–2009 school year and distributed a memo describing the external research requirements and application procedures to all principals, in an effort to raise awareness of requirements and procedures among campus staff. According to the results of the Employee Coordinated Survey conducted in Spring 2009, principals (65%) were more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement “I know what to do if an external researcher

comes to my campus” than were teachers (37%). This suggests the need for increased efforts to disseminate information about external research procedures directly to teachers or to request that principals forward the ERC’s memo to their staff.

- In September 2008, for the second consecutive year, the ERCs presented an overview of external research procedures to faculty and graduate students in the College of Education at The University of Texas. The presentation was well received and will be conducted on at least a biannual basis to facilitate communication about application procedures between the ERCs and one of the largest local pools of potential applicants.
- In response to board members’ concerns about the transparency of external research and data-sharing agreement policies and procedures, the ERCs, in collaboration with the Office of the General Counsel, drafted a Release of Student Records for External Research and Evaluation form to be provided to parents and guardians each year during student registration (see Appendixes A-1 and A-2). This form provides an overview of the external research process and gives parents and guardians the opportunity to opt out of the sharing of student records via data-sharing agreements. This form was distributed by the Office of Student Services during the Spring 2009 and Fall 2009 registration periods.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- The number of parents and guardians who opted out of data-sharing agreements by returning the Release of Student Records for External Research and Evaluation form has not yet been determined, but preliminary data suggest that large numbers of forms were returned. The 2009–2010 summary report should include an analysis of the impact of providing parents with the opportunity to opt out of data-sharing agreements on the quality of the data that can be provided to external researchers and evaluators.

Appendix A-1. Release of Student Records Example, English Version

RELEASE OF STUDENT RECORDS FOR EXTERNAL RESEARCH OR EVALUATION OFFICE OF ACCOUNTABILITY / DEPARTMENT OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

Dear Parents and Guardians,

AISD is committed to providing your child the best educational experience possible and to keeping students and their personal information safe and secure. As you have seen in the accompanying *Notice of Student Records Maintained by the Austin Independent School District*, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) requires that educational records must be kept private from persons and organizations outside the district.

Also, as listed in the *Notice*, there are several exemptions to this requirement, including one for persons and organizations conducting educational research and evaluation. Each year, AISD receives a large number of requests to support the work of various community groups, government agencies, university-based researchers, and educational research firms, so the district has developed rules and guidelines to handle the review and approval of these requests. District administrators may enter into research partnerships with outside agencies and university researchers when they believe these partnerships will benefit AISD students, families, and staff; will benefit educational practice as a whole; or will facilitate student participation in important programs such as Austin Community College's *College Connections*.

Please be assured that in all cases where data are collected directly from students, outside researchers are required to obtain active, written consent from you. However, in cases where only access to existing education records is required and the requesting person or organization has effectively demonstrated (a) the educational purpose of the research and (b) the procedures for ensuring data security, the district may enter into a Data Sharing Agreement with them.

In an effort to keep you informed about the research going on in the district, we are pleased to announce that a listing of all current research partnerships, the purpose of the projects, and summaries of any available results now is posted under the Current Projects section of the Program Evaluation website at: <http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/evaluation/currentprojects.phtml>.

A complete overview of external research policies and application procedures is available at: <http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/research/> and External Research Summary Reports for 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 are available at: <http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/evaluation/reports.phtml>.

If you have any questions about external research partnerships, policies, or procedures, or your student's rights as a research participant; please call Dr. Cathy Malerba at 512-414-3565 or Dr. Angelica Ware Herrera at 512-414-3732, or email inquiries to externalresearch@austinisd.org.

If you choose not to have your child's records included in these research partnerships, please return this form to your student's school along with your other registration materials. Please be advised that a new form will be provided for each school year your student attends AISD.

I DO NOT WANT MY STUDENT'S EDUCATIONAL RECORDS SHARED AS PART OF ANY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH OR EVALUATION CONCERNING THE **2009-2010** SCHOOL YEAR THAT IS CONDUCTED BY PERSONS OR ORGANIZATIONS OUTSIDE OF AISD

Student Name: _____ ID Number _____ Campus: _____

Parent/Guardian printed name: _____

Parent/Guardian signature: _____

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Appendix A-2. Release of Student Records Example, Spanish Version

PERMISO DE DIVULGACIÓN DE REGISTROS ESTUDIANTILES PARA INVESTIGACIÓN EXTERNA O EVALUACIONES
OFFICE OF ACCOUNTABILITY / DEPARTMENT OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

Muy estimados padres y custodios legales,

AISD está dedicado a ofrecer a sus hijos la mejor experiencia educacional posible y a mantener a los estudiantes y su información personal segura y protegida. Como ustedes han visto en la información adjunta: *Aviso de los registros de estudiantes que conserva el Distrito Escolar Independiente de Austin*, los Derechos educacionales de la familia y la Ley de privacidad de 1974 (FERPA) requieren que los registros educacionales se mantengan protegidos de personas y organizaciones ajenas al distrito.

Además, según la lista del *Aviso*, hay varias exenciones a este requisito, incluida la de personas y organizaciones que hacen investigación y evaluación de programas educativos. Cada año, AISD recibe un gran número de peticiones de apoyar el trabajo de varios grupos comunitarios, agencias de gobierno, investigadores con base universitaria y compañías educacionales investigadoras; por eso, el distrito ha formulado reglas y directrices para manejar la revisión y aprobación de estas peticiones. Administradores del distrito pueden formar parte de asociaciones de investigación con agencias externas e investigadores universitarios, cuando ellos crean que estas asociaciones benefician a estudiantes, familias y personal de AISD, y vayan a beneficiar el ejercicio educacional en general, o a facilitar la participación de estudiantes en programas importantes como *College Connections*, de Austin Community College.

Les rogamos que tengan la seguridad de que en todos los casos en que se colectan datos directamente de los estudiantes, se requiere a los investigadores externos que obtengan por escrito el consentimiento activo de ustedes. Sin embargo, en casos en que solo se requiere acceso a registros ya existentes de educación, y que la persona u organización que los pide ha comprobado efectivamente (a) el propósito educacional de la investigación y (b) los procedimientos para asegurar la seguridad de los datos, el distrito puede hacer un convenio para compartir información con ellos.

En el esfuerzo por mantener a ustedes informados de las investigaciones que está haciéndose en el distrito, nos complace informarles que una lista de todas las asociaciones actuales de investigación, el propósito de los proyectos y los resúmenes de resultados disponibles, están publicados en la sección de Proyectos actuales del sitio web de Evaluación de programas, en <http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/evaluation/currentprojects.phtml>

Una perspectiva general completa de normas de investigación y procedimientos de aplicación externos está disponible en <http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/research/>, y el resumen de informes de investigación externa para 2006-2007 y 2007-2008 está disponible en <http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/evaluation/reports.phtml>.

Si ustedes tienen preguntas sobre asociaciones de investigación externa, normas o procedimientos, o sobre los derechos de su estudiante como participante en una investigación, sírvanse llamar a la Dra. Cathy Malerba, en el número 512-414-3565, o para servicio en español, a la Dra. Angelica Ware Herrera, en el 512-414-3732, o enviar sus preguntas por correo electrónico a externalresearch@austinisd.org.

Si prefieren que los registros de su hijo(a) no se incluyan en estas asociaciones de investigación, sírvanse devolver esta forma a la escuela de su estudiante, junto con los demás materiales de matrícula. Les avisamos que se les dará una nueva forma por cada año escolar que su estudiante asiste a AISD.

YO NO QUIERO QUE LOS REGISTROS EDUCACIONALES DE MI ESTUDIANTE SE COMPARTAN COMO PARTE DE NINGUNA INVESTIGACIÓN O EVALUACIÓN EDUCACIONAL CONCERNIENTE AL AÑO ESCOLAR 2009-2010, QUE HAGAN PERSONAS U ORGANIZACIONES FUERA DE AISD

Nombre del estudiante: _____ Número de ID _____ Escuela _____

Nombre de padres/custodio legal (en letra de molde): _____

Firma de padres/custodio legal: _____

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AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

Meria J. Carstarphen, Ed.D.

OFFICE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Anne Ware, Ph.D.

DEPARTMENT OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

Holly Williams, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

Cathy Malerba, Ph.D.

Angelica W. Herrera, Ph.D.



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