

# EVALUATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE BRIEF

## for OAH & ACYF Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Grantees

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### Recommendations for Successfully Recruiting and Retaining District Participation in a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Impact Evaluation

Nearly all school districts require research to be approved before conducting a program evaluation in their schools. Individual schools do not have the authority to consent to participate in a program evaluation. Permission must first come from the district; then the researcher can begin recruiting schools. This brief provides guidance on obtaining district approval to participate in an evaluation of a teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) program implemented in a school setting. This guidance is designed both to ensure compliance with district regulations and to inform districts of their role in the evaluation. There is a follow up brief that provides recommendations for recruiting schools available [here](#).

In this brief, we suggest a sequence of steps to gain districts' interest in and ultimately approval for an impact evaluation. The steps include (1) planning, (2) initial contact, (3) preparing a research application, (4) preparing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), and (5) contacting schools (Figure 1). We present steps in a question-and-answer format, with best practices for recruitment highlighted in boxes.

Figure 1. District Recruitment Process



#### Step 1: Planning

In the planning phase of district recruitment, the key steps are to:

- Find contact information for key district staff
- Examine the district's research review process
- Prepare materials for the initial contact with the district
- Secure letters of support from stakeholders, if possible

#### Which key people should I contact at the district?

The first step in the planning stage is to get the contact information for the district superintendent, the deputy superintendent, or an assistant superintendent who oversees curriculum and instruction. Nearly all district websites have this information available, although finding it can take some digging. Superintendents are normally very busy so we recommend starting with an assistant superintendent or the deputy superintendent.

You should also get contact information for the superintendent's executive assistant or secretary. They can be excellent resources to help identify the best contact person and recommend ways to reach that person.

#### How can I learn about the district requirements for reviewing research?

Almost all districts will require a research application. In most cases, the district website has directions for submitting an application to conduct research. Before contacting the district representative, check the website to see if the district requires a formal application process. If you can't find instructions for completing a research application or are unsure whether the district requires one, then plan to ask the district representative if the district has such a requirement. Doing this homework at the planning stage will add legitimacy to your initial contact by showing you understand the district's processes and procedures.

## BEST PRACTICES

### Finding district research requirements

Search the district website for terms like “external research application,” “research proposal,” “research review board,” “research council,” “office of research and evaluation,” or “program evaluations.”

### What kinds of materials should I prepare for the initial contact with the district?

We recommend preparing two items for the initial contact:

(1) a letter that explains the study and the benefits of participation to the district, and (2) an accompanying email with similar information. The materials should briefly cover the following key topics:

- The challenge of teen pregnancy—in particular, how it affects students in the district
- The program being tested
- The benefits to the district for participating in the study
- A high-level description of the requirements for participation (such as willingness to implement curriculum X, comply with random assignment, or agree to at least Y years of program intake)
- A brief timeline for the study
- Your contact information

It may help to include with the letter a complementary letter of endorsement or support. A letter of support can help stress the importance of participation and communicate that key stakeholders support the program.

### Whom should I contact to get letters of support for the study?

The state grantee, the state health department, and the federal project officer can be great resources of support for your teen pregnancy prevention study. You can contact them and ask for a letter of endorsement for the study. In addition, if you have previously provided the program in schools, you could ask the principal(s) or superintendent to provide an endorsement. Endorsement letters can add legitimacy to your request to conduct the study.

## BEST PRACTICES

### Preparing the contact letter and email

It’s important to provide some—but not too much—detail about the study in the initial letter and email. Limit to two pages if possible.

## Step 2: Initial contact

The second stage of district recruitment is reaching out and making contact. This stage is when many study staff have difficulty getting their “foot in the door.” The following questions and answers offer some ideas for facilitating this process successfully.

### How should I contact the district?

The first step is to send a written copy of the introductory letter to the key district contacts. A hard copy letter can differentiate your request from the many emails that district representatives receive. That said, an email can help you stay on a district person’s radar. Thus, we recommend sending a follow-up email that contains the same information as the hard copy letter about one week after the letter. In the email, say you will follow up by phone in the next few days (and then do so). The district now has multiple modes of hearing about the study, and will expect your phone call.

## BEST PRACTICES

### Making the initial contact stand out

Sending the initial letter by priority mail is a good way to make sure the district contact sees it.

### What should I say in the initial phone conversation?

The next step is to follow up with a telephone call. Be patient but persistent, as it may take several attempts to reach the district contacts. If you cannot reach them the first time, leave a message explaining why you are calling, and reference the letter and email you sent. If you speak to secretaries, ask them the best time to speak to the district contacts. If the contacts don’t return your call after three or four days, you should follow up with another call. Also send them a reminder email about your request and say that you would like to arrange a time to call them.

When you reach the contacts by phone, the goal of the call is to “sell” them the project by gaining their interest in pursuing it further. Most school districts have many requests to participate in evaluations and have other data reporting requirements, so you have to convince them that the evaluation is important and explain how it contributes to the district and students. It may help to draw on the letters of support (if possible) as a way to convey the importance of this project and the desire from key stakeholders for districts to participate in the program.

Ideally, the initial phone conversation will pique the district representatives’ interest in the study and they will encourage you to submit materials to the research review board for further consideration. The district representative may also want to have a follow-up meeting (with additional district stakeholders) to discuss the project in more detail.

## How do I sell the project?

Discuss the national problem of teen pregnancy, and its prevalence in the targeted geographical area (this information can be obtained through a state Department of Public Health website or at <http://www.guttmacher.org/>). Focus on how the impact evaluation can benefit society and the district specifically (for example, the curriculum is provided at no or low cost and youth will receive an intervention that is needed in the community). Also explain how the study team will minimize the burden on school staff and students, and explain the types of incentives the study will offer.

## I've made initial contact with district staff and they are interested in a follow-up meeting. Now what?

Once you have contacted the district representatives and they have expressed preliminary interest in the study, it may be necessary to meet again in person to provide more information about the impact evaluation and data collection activities; for instance, they may wish to see a copy of the curriculum or baseline survey. If you can't meet in person, arrange a follow-up time to speak on the phone, and email the representatives any materials you want them to look at (or materials they have requested) while you discuss the study. In addition to "selling" the study during this follow-up meeting, be prepared to answer any questions about it. Your local IRB submission will contain much of the information district representatives may ask about.

## The district seems interested in moving forward—what should I do next?

Once the district has indicated it is willing to consider participating, work with the district representative to determine next steps for securing participation. Most districts require studies to submit a research application to their research review board.

The next step is to complete the district research application if needed and prepare an MoU for the district to sign. Step 3 explains the steps for submitting a research application to districts that have a formal application process. Step 4 explains the process for preparing an MoU.

## Step 3: Preparing a Research Application

Most districts require anyone interested in conducting an evaluation in their schools to submit a formal research application that outlines the study. This application will likely be reviewed by a research review board, which will determine whether the study is valuable and appropriate for the district.

## How can I make sure the research application process goes smoothly?

First, read through all the district requirements and prepare any required documents. Errors or missing documents can delay the approval process or lead to a rejection of the application. Much of the information a district application requires is similar to, or the same as, the information submitted to your local IRB.

## Deadline for submitting the research application

Check for a deadline for submitting the application. In some districts, staff meet only periodically to review research applications. The deadlines are normally in July, November, or April to be eligible for collecting data during the following school year.

## What is the district looking for in my research application?

Although district staff understand the importance of conducting research to improve the education of all students, they also have a legal and moral obligation to review any request to collect data in the school district. A district's main obligations are to:

- Protect students and staff from harm, violation of their rights, and the loss of privacy
- Protect the educational process from unnecessary distractions or interruptions
- Protect district data from misappropriation or unjustified use

Districts expect the research study to be well-designed, answer specific research questions, and use appropriate data collection methods. It is important to clearly communicate to the district the research goal, the research design, the sample selection, the survey instruments, burden on staff and students, and the analysis plan. A district may reject a research application because (1) the application was submitted after the district deadline; (2) the research was poorly designed, described, or justified in the application; (3) it sees no direct benefit to the school district; (4) it believes the research is too burdensome on staff and students; or (5) it thinks the school district is already burdened with other reporting requirements from other agencies and therefore doesn't have the time and resources to participate.

It's also important to note that receiving district approval to conduct research doesn't mean the target schools or their staff and students are required to participate. Principals still have final say about whether or not their school will participate. Having district support is very helpful in recruiting schools, but it's not a guarantee—it is only one more step in the process. A separate brief, available [here](#), provides guidance on school recruitment.

## What kind of information is included in the application?

A typical research application will require you to do the following:

- Provide the contact information for the researcher submitting the application
- Indicate the study start and end dates
- Explain the process for assigning youth to intervention and counterfactual conditions
  - Be sure to justify the need for random assignment, if the study will be using it, and explain why random assignment is a fair method of allocating services or programming. Sometimes people resist random assignment because they believe all youth need the services or program being provided.
- Outline the process for obtaining informed consent from parents and youth aged 18 or older, and youth assent
  - At a minimum, districts will want consent forms to clearly indicate the following:
    - The purpose of the research
    - The requirements of the study and any potential compensation or incentives
    - The potential risks and benefits of participation
    - Acknowledgement that participation is voluntary
    - A contact person for questions
- Discuss the content of the intervention and counterfactual condition
  - *Intervention:* Aside from describing the features of the program, it is also important to communicate that the program content provided to students is medically accurate.
  - *Counterfactual:* Describe the comparison condition, that is, whether youth will receive the usual programming or another new curriculum or service. Be sure to describe the value of the comparison programming to students (so the district sees value in what they will receive), but point out that the programming is unlikely to affect sexual behavior outcomes as much as the intervention will.
- Describe the data collection methods, including:
  - The sampling and recruitment methods—for example, the target population, the sampling frame, the list of schools, and the selection process for the sample.
  - The survey instruments and assessments.
  - The data collection activities and procedures (such as surveys and classroom observations). In particular, discuss how schools will be involved in the data collection and how you will coordinate with them to facilitate this process.
  - Whether or not you will need to collect administrative data about students from the district. Be specific about what data you will request from the district.

## BEST PRACTICES

### Protecting student information

Districts require written parental consent before minor students can participate, or before the district can release any information about the students, including names and contact information. The study must also have instructional materials available for inspection by parents.

- Describe the analysis plan, including the statistical analysis and how you will use the data
- Explain how the study will protect the data and the identities of the subjects
  - Because of districts' special relationship to parents and students, they must follow strict guidelines for protecting student information. Be aware that some districts may require you to pass an online training course such as the [National Institutes of Health's Protecting Human Research Participants](#) or the U.S. Department of Education's FERPA awareness training.
    - The training courses provide information and test trainees' knowledge about the protection of human subjects for research purposes and the rights of individuals participating in a research study.
    - These training courses are typically free and available online. They take about 30 minutes to complete.
- Describe the level of burden the research will place on students, teachers, and the school district generally
  - Districts are most concerned with the amount of time the research activity will disrupt classroom instruction.
  - Specify the number of participants, for example, "Forty 9th grade students in two schools will be asked to complete a survey."
- Clearly state the amount of time it will take to complete the activity with each individual, the number of contacts needed with students and school staff, how long study staff will be at the school, and how long data collection will take
  - For example, "Students will be removed from the classroom individually to complete the survey. One researcher will be on site to administer the survey and the survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. We expect the data collection to take four days."
- Provide information on any compensation that the study will offer to participants
  - The study might offer compensation to students, to school staff who assist with data collection, or to schools for allowing the data collection activities to occur. For example,



“Students will be provided with a \$5 gift card following completion of the survey and the school will be provided with a \$250 incentive after data collection is complete.”

- Provide copies of all data collection materials and correspondence with the schools
  - These materials include any letters, emails, or consent forms; the survey; and any data forms that school staff will need to complete
- Get certification for research staff to visit classrooms
  - It is important to note some districts may require people to be fingerprinted, complete a TB test, and have their background checked against the National Sex Offender Registry before being allowed into a school to collect data

### **I submitted the research application. Now what?**

When you submit the application, make sure to keep any reference number the district provided to confirm receipt of the submission. Some districts respond to the application within two weeks, but others may take three to six months to review the application. Check the district website for the time frame in which you should receive a response. Some districts review research applications only a few times during the school year, so the response may take longer depending on when the application was submitted.

Be prepared to respond to any follow-up questions or comments the district may have about the study. Most follow-up questions or comments are about possible incentives for staff or students, or a specific limit on the amount that can be paid. There may also be questions or comments on collecting consent or about the wording in the documents used to collect consent. Some districts have specific procedures and language for collecting consent, which you may need to follow.

Districts receive many requests to conduct research. It will take time to review the application and sometimes multiple people are responsible for reviewing the application before it receives final approval. Be prepared to check in every two weeks with the district research application contact unless you have received a specific date for a decision. Whenever you speak with someone, ask for a date when you can expect to receive a decision. Consider keeping a log of your contacts, including the date, time, and person you spoke with.

### **What if a district refuses the application?**

Districts often refuse research applications because of the perceived burden on school staff and students. Schools have many mandated data reporting requirements and student assessments at

## **BEST PRACTICES**

### **Inquiring about the status of the research application**

If you don't receive a response by the time given for it on the district website, make sure to contact the person to whom the application was submitted. You can begin by asking whether the district staff have the documents they need and whether they have any initial questions about your materials and application. Ask for an estimate of when they expect to respond. Use the specific reference number for the application in all correspondence with the district (if one was provided). If you are unaware of a time frame in which the district is supposed to provide a response, contact the district after two weeks of the submission to check on the status of the application. *Do not attempt to contact the schools selected to participate until the district has given permission.*

the district, state, and national levels during a typical school year. Always be prepared to respond to their concerns and offer solutions as best you can.

### **Can I try to convince the district to reconsider a refusal?**

If the district didn't provide a specific reason for refusing to participate, feel free to ask for more details on its decision. If it refused because the schools are too busy during the data collection period, see if there is another time that could work without jeopardizing your data collection activities. Always remain positive and focus on resolving any concerns the district may have. Be as flexible as possible while still adhering to the research design.

### **Step 4: Preparing an MoU**

Once the district has approved the research application, it is necessary to get a written agreement in place. An MoU with the district is strongly recommended to ensure that the district and the research team understand each other's roles and responsibilities.

### **What information should be included in an MoU?**

An MoU isn't a legally binding document, but it does provide a common list of responsibilities, including data collection activities, that you and the district agree to. Refer to Step 3 (preparing research application); the MoU can follow the same format.

## BEST PRACTICES

### Drafting the MoU

You will be responsible for putting the MoU together and submitting it to the district for signature. Work with your district contact to determine who the MoU should be submitted to for signature. Normally it is the district superintendent who is authorized to sign the agreement.

## Step 5: Contacting Schools

Once the district agrees to participate in the program, the research team can recruit individual schools. See the related brief, available [here](#), for information on that process.