Austin Independent School District
Department of Program Evaluation

EXTERNAL RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT: 2007–2008

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 (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], 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, 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 overall percentage of proposals accepted in 2007-2008; the types of groups and individuals who submit proposals; and trends among topic areas, grade levels, and the staff and student groups most often involved in the research. This report also addresses administrative considerations, accomplishments to date, and recommendations for the coming school year.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The following sections will present information covering various aspects of external research including: the external research proposal approval rate in 2007-2008, participant categories or types, time required of the research projects, topic areas and grade levels, data-sharing agreements, and a summary of successes and recommendations.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH PROPOSAL APPROVAL RATE

Between September 2007 and April 2008, AISD received 117 applications to conduct research and evaluation in the district. Most of the applications came from The University of Texas at Austin (47%); 25% were from other universities; and the remaining 28% were from government agencies, research firms, community groups, and AISD employees. Of the total number of applications, 75% were approved for implementation, which was comparable to the overall 79% approval rate in 2006–2007. Nearly a quarter of proposals were withdrawn, or assumed to be withdrawn because of inactivity, and 2% were declined. Of those declined, one was too demanding of staff or student time and the other 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 with 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 = 51)	86%	0%	14%
University faculty (n = 31)	65%	6%	29%
Research firms (n = 15)	53%	0%	47%
Government agencies (n = 8)	88%	0%	12%
AISD employees (n = 7)	86%	0%	14%
Community groups (n = 5)	80%	0%	20%
TOTAL (n = 117)	75%	2%	23%

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 88 proposals that were approved in 2007–2008, 58% involved only students, only teachers, or both groups (Table 2). This rate is lower than that reported in 2006–2007, when 62% 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, which require a minimum of staff time to facilitate, or through the use of existing data. When existing district records are used, either students' parents/guardians provide active consent or an ERC creates and maintains 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)
Students only	38%	11%
Teachers only	23%	22%
Students and teachers	12%	25%
Teachers and administrators	12%	1%
Other participants or participant combinations (i.e., students and parents or student, teachers and parents)	15%	41%
TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**

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

In order to provide accurate estimates of participant burden, the external research database was modified in 2007–2008 to track the number of participants and the amount of time required of participants for each project. On average, the most time was required of teacher participants; administrators and other non-teaching staff had the lowest average time requirements in 2007–2008 (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Information for Approved Projects, by Participant Group, 2007–2008

Participant group (number of projects)	Mean number of participants	N range	Mean hours required per participant	Time range in hours
Students (48)	139	3–1320	3.4	0–70
Parents (19)	94	2–600	3.2	0–40
Teachers (59)	46	1–1000	5.8	0–96
Administrators (6)	20	1–100	0.6	0–3
Other staff (4)	14	2–36	1.9	.75–3

Source. AISD external research database

TOPIC AREAS AND GRADE LEVELS

Upon entry into the external research database, projects are categorized into one or two broad research topics. As in 2006–2007, the most common topic areas in 2007–2008 were student social or emotional development, academic achievement, 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.

Table 4. Approved Projects, by Research Topic Area, 2006–2007 and 2007–2008

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

Source. AISD external research database

Proposals also are categorized by their grade-level focus (Table 5). As in 2006–2007, the largest percentage of projects in 2007–2008 exclusively concerned the elementary level (44%), followed by those focused only at the high school level (24%). We anticipate a significant decline in the number of proposals approved concerning the high school level in 2008–2009. The demand on student, staff, and administrator time is quite high because of the high school redesign initiative, and high school administrators have acknowledged that they will be unable to support as many projects as usual for at least one to two school years.

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

Topic area	2006–2007	2007–2008
Elementary only (early childhood – grade 5)	25	39
Elementary and middle school	4	4
Middle school only (grades 6 – 8)	9	9
Middle and high school	9	3
High school only (grades 9 – 12)	25	21
All levels	13	11
District-level personnel only	0	2
TOTAL	**85**	**89**

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 that 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.

As of Spring 2007, AISD's Department of Management Information Systems has provided a staff counterpart to the ERC, so that the role of drafting data-sharing agreements can be assigned according to the purpose of the agreement. Between June 2008 and May 2008, 13% of data-sharing agreements were drafted for the purpose of protecting data elements accessed by external software service providers, and thus fell under the responsibilities of the Management Information Systems 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 have completed a security audit that was evaluated by the AISD Department of Network Systems and Support. In these cases, data were shared or access permitted only upon a favorable recommendation from Network Systems staff.

Table 6. Data Sharing Agreements, by Purpose, 2006–2007 and 2007–2008

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

Source. AISD data-sharing agreement database

SUMMARY OF SUCCESSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DATA-SHARING AGREEMENT TRACKING SYSTEM AND DATABASE

- The shared Lotus Notes-based data-sharing agreement tracking system and database continues to be a notable success. This shared database facilitates communication between the DPE, Management Information Systems, Network Systems and Support, and the Office of the General Counsel to ensure data security.
- The database allows for the electronic review, approval, and storage of data-sharing agreements and security audits.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH APPLICATION PROCESS, PROCEDURES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- As of May 2008, two Evaluation Analysts from the DPE share the role of external research coordinator. In addition to their other duties, the two analysts respond to external research requests and coordinate the application and approval process.
- As recommended last year, the external research database was modified to clearly list a limited number of broad research topic categories to simplify the reporting of commonly researched subject areas. The database also now includes fields to record the number of participants by grouping (students vs. staff), and the time required of each, so that an accurate accounting of participant burden can be tallied.
- Beginning in Fall 2008, all external research applicants will submit their application and accompanying research materials electronically. A generic email address, externalresearch@austinisd.org, was created to receive the electronic applications. The ERCs will continue to evaluate applications and assist applicants to prepare their applications before they are forwarded for committee review.
- As of the summer of 2008, applicants are required to submit parent consent forms and student assent forms, in English and Spanish, at the time of application instead of upon approval.
- Beginning in Fall 2008, all website materials, materials and information will be updated to reflect the new application procedures.

- As of October 2008, anyone desiring to partner with AISD for a grant must first submit a completed external research application and go through the review process.
- A presentation of the research application and review process for interested faculty and students at The University of Texas was well attended and this presentation is expected to take place annually. Presentations should be scheduled during the Fall semester, well in advance of the December 1 application deadline.
- Beginning in the 2008-2009 school year, executive summaries of completed external research projects will be placed in a library in the AISD intranet for the purpose of sharing research findings and information with district staff. This library will be accessible to all district administrators so they can find information about research that was conducted in the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The ERCs should seek opportunities to present the external research process overview to students and faculty at other local universities (e.g., Texas State and St. Edwards) and to large non-profit organizations (e.g., United Way Capital Area, YouthLaunch) that are known to provide a lot of program support to AISD students and that are likely to conduct program evaluations using district data.
- Because of the success of the data-sharing agreement electronic approval process, the ERCs should investigate the possibility of initiating a paperless external research review and approval process. If support exists for such a change, one of the ERCs should initiate a request for the development of this system in collaboration with the appropriate staff in Management Information Systems.