

Out of the Office, Into the Schools:

Lessons Learned From Collecting and Using Student and Teacher Data

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As accountability and research based decision-making become increasingly important to educators and to education, interactions between researchers and practitioners are bound to accelerate. In the past, such interactions have ranged from wonderful successes to absolute disasters. The following field based “lessons learned”, from the Effective Schools Study¹ are offered in the hope of averting disasters and contributing to both better data and better relationships between practitioners and researchers.

1. Follow district and school research requirements.

Most districts have criteria to be met and forms to be completed prior to any research being conducted in the district. This must be done. In addition, it is often useful to develop a detailed letter of understanding to participating districts listing project research goals, tasks, timelines, approximate amounts of time teachers and others will need to participate in the research, types of information that will be collected and assurances of confidentiality. The letter can also include what the district wants from the research and what it will and will not allow the researchers to do.

¹ The Effective Schools Study, funded by the National Science Foundation, is being conducted by the Urban Institute and Campbell-Kibler Associates in conjunction with the School District of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Urban Systemic Program and the three El Paso area districts that make up El Paso Urban Systemic Program, El Paso Independent School District, Socorro Independent School District and Ysleta Independent School District.



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2. Make use of district expertise.

District staff know a lot and usually are willing to share. If you ask them to review aspects of your research, you may learn, for example, that they already have data on some of your questions or that in their district some terms have very different meanings from those you may have had in mind. Also, by sharing preliminary research results with district staff you may get useful suggestions from them for next steps in data analysis or additional data collection ideas (such as interviewing school custodians to get a different perspective on school discipline and student behavior).

3. Never forget “WIIFM” (what’s in it for me).

Whether we ask “what’s in it for me?” or not, we are usually thinking of it. As researchers we are getting something out of our work with the schools (data, grant money, fame), but what are the schools getting? The honor of working with us doesn’t go that far. Think about what benefit participants can derive from the research and, if possible, provide it. The following are some WIIFMs that have worked for us:

- **Results from the research.** If it is feasible, this can also mean doing additional data runs to provide districts with some specific information they desire.
- **Money.** While money is good, often teachers and principals prefer gift certificates that can be used for books or for educational supplies. Some prefer that money be given to individual schools to be deposited in a teacher fund for teachers to draw on for field trips and other school activities. There is a concern that paying respondents may skew their responses. Before you decide, check with those involved.
- **Professional development opportunities.** Researchers may have skills and expertise in areas of interest to district staff and teachers. Providing a free training or workshop in an area of interest is usually much appreciated.
- **Food.** Student and teacher interviews, focus groups and survey administrations go a lot more smoothly when there is food. If these are held during a lunch period, pizza and soda/juice work well. Cookies, especially Campbell-Kibler Associates’ homemade chocolate chip cookies, are popular anytime.
- **Thank you presents.** Puzzles, pens, posters and other materials on topics of interest to the school or the district all make good thank you presents. And of course thank you notes or e-mails to interviewees and focus group participants are a must.

4. Do your homework first.

Practitioners are busy people. You can get a lot of information from school, district and state web sites, reports, the Core of Common Data, and other sources. It takes less district time and effort to validate information than it does to pull the information together and it does show that you appreciate that their time is valuable.

5. Provide feedback.

One major reason districts participate in research studies is that they want to see the results. At a minimum, participants should be provided with copies of the results in a format that they can use. It is to your benefit as well as theirs to provide districts with

drafts of your findings and get their comments and concerns before results are made public. Too, while teachers may not be interested in highly technical findings, they will be interested in findings that have implications for their work. To avoid contaminating subsequent data collection, you probably don't want to provide feedback on study results to those involved until after the data collection is over.

6. Minimize or eliminate surprises.

Things happen; things change. That's a fact of life. However, when something does change, be it a date, a survey or the person who will be collecting the data, let district and school people know. No practitioners should ever have to ask a researcher, "Who are you and why are you here?" One way to ensure that this doesn't happen is to make one last call the day before you visit a site to remind people that you will be there and to check that everything is still ok. "No surprises" also means that changes in or additions to research directions should be checked with the districts first. Most of all, it means that districts should hear about the results of the research from the researchers, not from the literature and certainly not from the press.

7. When at a school, follow the rules.

Find out if the school has an established procedure for visitors, and if they do, follow it. Otherwise:

- Upon entering a school, go to the main office, identify yourself to the principal or the assistant principal, state your business in the school and mention how long you plan to be there.
- When audio taping interviews or focus groups, obtain verbal permission from those being taped before turning on the tape recorder.
- Preserve teacher and student confidentiality at all costs.

8. Remember what's important.

The most important function of a school is to help children learn. Researchers collecting data in schools are interlopers who depend on the good will of administrators, staff and students for our very presence in a school. It is required by duty, courtesy and just plain common sense, that we do everything possible to show respect for the main "job" of teachers, administrators and students, which is learning and teaching².

² Clewell, Beatriz Chu, Personal Communication, March, 2001.