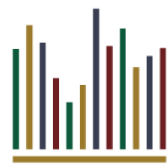


# RESEARCH APPLICATION RESOURCE GUIDE

**Fulton County Schools**

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**Department of Program Evaluation**



*Please note that this document is subject to periodic updates.*

Revised December 2023

## Purpose of the Research Application Resource Guide

This Research Application Resource Guide aims to inform researchers about the research application and approval process in Fulton County Schools (FCS). The intended audience of the resource guide includes academic and research staff, college and university students, independent research agencies, employees of FCS (conducting research outside of their job-related responsibilities), FCS Charter School employees, and other stakeholders wishing to conduct research in FCS.

The Department of Program Evaluation (DPE) oversees the research request process. It monitors approved research to ensure that research efforts conducted in FCS comply with relevant laws, policies, and procedures. The department places great trust in research applicants to maintain the highest standards for research and compliance with the conditions of approval outlined in the Research Approval Agreement, which is issued after an applicant has been approved.

This document will provide information regarding the research application submission, review, and approval process. Specifically, this resource guide is designed to:

- Clarify the expectations and requirements associated with seeking approval to conduct research at FCS
- Outline the steps required to prepare and submit a research request, as well as provide post-submission information and FCS requirements upon approval
- Improve the quality of proposed research applications by providing prospective researchers with the criteria the research committee will use to evaluate requests.

This resource guide is divided into three parts:

- [Part I](#) provides general information about conducting research with FCS
- [Part II](#) outlines the application submission and review process
- [Part III](#) describes what the researcher can expect post-approval and expectations upon approval

We welcome your interest in FCS and look forward to reviewing your completed application.

If you have additional questions upon reading this Research Application Resource Guide, please direct inquiries to DPE at [programevaluation@fultonschools.org](mailto:programevaluation@fultonschools.org).

## Part I – General Information

Fulton County Schools believes in the power of research to improve the body of knowledge related to learning and development in our schools. We welcome partnerships with the research community that **substantially benefit FCS, its students, and/or staff and focus on district-approved programs, resources, or curriculum.**

### Who must apply for research approval?

All persons interested in conducting research in FCS must have prior approval from the district. The following groups of individuals are eligible to apply:

- FCS staff seeking an advanced degree (Masters, Specialist, Doctorate)
- Dissertation candidates (including FCS employees)
- University faculty
- Research firms
- Government agencies (except for compliance and enforcement purposes)
- Non-profit organizations
- Program partners

### What constitutes research?

- Collecting data from students, parents, teachers, administrators, or other staff members through surveys, which are defined as a collection of information from individuals through their responses to questions (Board Policy IJA)
- Observing/conducting focus groups or individual interviews with students, parents, teachers, administrators, or other staff members
- Accessing identifiable or non-identifiable student information to support research activities, including publicly available FCS data
- Use of FCS resources (staff, sites) to recruit participants for external research projects
- Program partners who wish to determine program effectiveness and efficiency

**All research requests must follow Board Policy, particularly the following:**

- [Board Policy IJ-Program Evaluation](#)
- [Operating Guideline IJ-Program Evaluation](#)
- [Board Policy IJA-Surveys](#)
- Operating Guideline IJA-Surveys
- [Board Policy IK- Complaint Resolution Process for Material Harmful to Minors](#)
- [Board Policy KBA-Promotion of Parental/Guardian Involvement](#)
- [Board Policy KNB-Protect Students First Act](#)
- [Operating Guidelines KNB-Protect Students First Act](#)

### What type of research is *not* eligible for district consideration?

- Master's degree studies by individuals who are **not** FCS employees
- Research to meet undergraduate or non-degree-seeking coursework requirements from non-FCS employees

- Studies that involve greater than minimal risk, such as substantial disruption to district and school activity or loss of confidentiality
- Exploratory research or national surveys that do not provide direct benefit to our students or practices
- Studies that would only benefit education in general rather than the Fulton County School System specifically
- Studies that do not focus on district-approved programs, curriculum, or resources
- Any research on sensitive or protected topics. Sensitive information includes but is not limited to (See [Board Policy EBC](#)):
  - Student or parents name, address, telephone number, and social security number
  - Student ID, grade, attendance, medical, or transcript information
  - Student or parent financial aid or similar financial information
  - Race/Ethnicity, birth date, age
  - Employee name, address, telephone number
  - Employee payroll and benefits information
  - Any information which by itself or if combined with other information would allow a person to be able to identify an individual discretely

### **What about action research?**

The main goal of action research is to address local-level problems in practice with the anticipation of finding immediate answers to questions or solutions to those problems (Mertler, 2018). Internal researchers who wish to improve their practice through this framework, including collecting data from students, parents, teachers, administrators, or other staff members, must seek approval through the Department of Program Evaluation by completing a research request.

### **Important practical considerations:**

FCS focuses on student achievement, and a core priority of the DPE is to serve our schools. For those reasons:

- Interference with school instruction and operations must be kept to a minimum.
- Due to the number of requests that DPE receives, our ability to review and support external research projects, and to provide access to student data, is limited.

### **Important restrictions:**

We are committed to protecting FCS' educational environment, students, staff, privacy, and data security.

- We have a legal and ethical obligation to protect the privacy of our students. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 USC § 1232g and its implementing regulations) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) (20 USC § 1232g and its implementing regulations) are federal laws that protect the privacy of students and education records. The laws apply to all schools that receive funds under an applicable US Department of Education program.
- FCS will carefully consider the best interest of its students before granting access to them, their data, or our staff and their data. **Any student information provided to support approved research must be anonymous and de-identified.** Data that is shared will be limited to what is determined to be directly relevant to the request as approved by the DPE.

- Requesters have the right, consistent with scientific standards, to publish, present, or use the research or data analysis, but only if the publication, presentation, or its use does not permit personal identification of the district, its teachers, students, or parents. The school system and school(s) shall not be identifiable in any research activity without the permission of the DPE.
- No research activity may be conducted in schools during the administration of standardized tests or at other times specified by the DPE or the school principal.
- Data collection that will lead to the identification of a student is strictly prohibited. This includes but is not limited to videotaping students, identifying student work samples, or identifying demographics in surveys. In addition, the use of any student work samples or surveys must be clearly described and provided for review in the application, and approval must be received before using or implementing either assessment tool.

### **What about the required consent procedures?**

FCS complies with all state and federal regulations regarding consent procedures for human research. FCS reserves the right to require written consent for studies involving students, staff, or parents, even if it is waived by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) / Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). Fulton County Schools is NOT an IRB.

FCS requires that researchers obtain written (active) parent consent *before* obtaining information from students. The participation of students, parents, and staff members in any research project is entirely voluntary. Researchers must obtain written permission from the student participant's parents/guardians using the *Parent/Guardian permission form* provided by DPE, in conjunction with any additional permission forms pertinent to the study, before including any participant.

## Part II – Application Submission and Review Process

### **Where can I find the research application?**

Research applications can be found on [DPE's website](#).

### **What criteria are used to review and approve research requests?**

FCS is committed to supporting relevant, well-designed research studies. All applicants must abide by the expectations outlined in Board Policy and demonstrate how their study would substantially benefit FCS, its students, and/or staff. In addition, the following criteria will be used to evaluate the appropriateness of FCS participation in the proposed research project:

- Alignment of the proposed research with district-approved programs, curriculum, or resources
- Technical soundness of the research methodology, measures, and proposed analysis
- Feasibility of study design in terms of time requirements from staff and students
- Confidentiality of data and privacy of participants
- Compliance with human consent procedures
- Appropriateness of the research topic for support in the public school setting
- Clarity of purpose and thoroughness of research plan

Research applicants should review these factors before submitting a research application, as FCS considers the abovementioned factors before moving an application forward. In addition, researchers should be far enough along in their training to understand how to develop a research question and design an appropriate study to answer the question without guidance from DPE staff.

### **What are FCS' district-approved programs, curriculum, and resources?**

FCS recognizes the importance of quality research to strengthen the public education system. FCS prioritizes those studies that align with district-approved programs, curriculum, and resources. A list of district-supported programs, curriculum, and resources includes but is not limited to the Program Inventory, Solutions Architecture and Application Governance (SAG), Curriculum Hub, district-approved software, and district-approved supplemental resources.

### **How can I avoid delays in the review process?**

Every year, FCS receives far greater requests for researchers than we can accommodate. To ensure a timely review process, researchers should submit all the required information well before submission deadlines and adequately address the protection of human subjects.

## **What do I submit as part of my application?**

A completed application includes the following components:

1. Institutional IRB approval or exemption letter (FCS is NOT an IRB)
2. Letters of support
3. Copy of all consent forms (see *Parent/Guardian permission form*)
4. Copy of all printed materials, surveys, or tests

## **Letters of Support**

*District Letter of Support:* Please include a letter of support from any district- or school-level employees if you have already obtained their support or commitment to participate in your research. Note that this agreement is not binding on the district.

*Dissertation Committee Chair Letter of Support:* If the researcher/primary investigator is a doctoral candidate, a copy of support from the dissertation committee or a letter from the candidate's dissertation committee chair is required. This letter should indicate that the candidate's dissertation committee has approved the proposed research project. *Research proposals not yet approved by the candidate's dissertation committee will only receive conditional approval, and the study cannot begin until the applicant receives this.*

## **Who reviews and approves the research requests? When will my application be reviewed?**

Research proposals will be accepted by the Department of Program Evaluation (DPE) throughout the year, according to the schedule posted on the DPE website.

DPE will review each proposal based on a standard rubric and respond by email to the researcher within approximately five (5) weeks of the submission deadline. The committee may approve, deny, or request modifications to research proposals.

Only complete research request applications will be reviewed by the department.

Researchers are encouraged to submit their applications as early as possible to ensure that the application is complete. **Please note that electronic submission of applications is required.**

### Part III – What to Expect Post-Approval

If you have submitted a request that has been approved, the following sections will become relevant to you when completing your study.

#### **What happens after a research request has been approved?**

All individuals whose application was reviewed by the committee will receive a decision email. For those who receive approval, please note that researchers may not begin data collection until they have received, signed, and emailed back the *Research Approval Agreement*.

The approval of the DPE does not obligate a particular school to participate in the research project. The decision to participate in the research rests on the principal of each school. The researcher must present the signed Research Approval Agreement to the principal to be considered for research at the school level. Researchers **must** obtain written permission using the *Principal Approval Form* (available on our department website) before starting any research activities and maintain this documentation for their records.

#### **What are the responsibilities of the researcher?**

The researcher assumes the responsibility for conducting proper and high-quality research. Upon being approved to conduct research in FCS, DPE expects all researchers will:

- Abide by FCS policies and procedures.
- Accept the responsibility to ensure that the research will abide by all relevant laws, including but not limited to FERPA, PPRA, and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) policies and regulations on protecting human subjects (45 CFR 46, as amended).
- Keep all personally identifiable information (as defined in FERPA) confidential, and do not disclose information obtained through the research agreement without the written permission of FCS.
- Agree that FCS will continue to own the data and agree to a data destruction schedule.
- Agree to bear all liability for activities conducted under the approved research, including, where permitted by law, indemnifying FCS and its employees, Board members, and contractors.
- Agree that information gathered during this research can be used for no purpose other than what was approved.
- Agree that access to data will be limited only to those representatives of the applicant's institution with legitimate interests under the approved research.
- Follow the procedures as approved in the application and modify procedures and instruments only with prior approval from DPE.



- Conduct and complete the research study within the approved timeline and meet any stipulations accompanying the approval letter.
- All studies are approved for a specific period. The researcher must file a Modification or Continuation Request Form if data collection exceeds this period.
- Submit a final report of the research findings no later than six months post-completion of the study with FCS.

Upon being approved to conduct research in FCS, DPE expects all researchers will **not** identify or include identifiable characteristics of schools without authorization from DPE. We also expect that all researchers will **not** publish any information that could be used to identify individual students or school system employees without DPE's authorization.

### **Reasons for termination of approved study**

DPE may terminate research being conducted within the district **at any time for any reason deemed appropriate at the discretion of FCS alone.**

### **What about the sharing of the results?**

A key factor in approving applications is the benefit of the research to our students. FCS requires that all approved researchers consent to provide a report of their findings no later than six months after the completion of their study with FCS. We anticipate that summaries would include the rationale/importance of the study, methods, bulleted findings, and implications.

### **What should I do if my research changes within the year or extends beyond a year?**

If your research substantially changes or goes beyond the school year of the approval period or takes place over more than one school year in a multi-year study:

1. Complete an electronic copy of the Project Status Update form (on the DPE website).
2. Submit IRB Approval (if applicable)