Guide to Conducting Research

Fort Worth INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Introduction

As a member of the education community, Fort Worth ISD (FWISD) values high-quality research that contributes to the advancement of teaching, learning, and student success in public schools. The District supports research, evaluation, and inquiry efforts that generate meaningful insights, inform decision-making, and enhance educational opportunities for students in FWISD and other urban school systems.

At the same time, FWISD recognizes that research activities may require the time, attention, and participation of students, families, staff, and schools. Accordingly, the District has established guidelines and procedures to ensure that all research conducted within FWISD is ethical, purposeful, and aligned with district priorities. These guidelines are intended to protect instructional time and safeguard the privacy and rights of students, families, and employees. They are also intended to ensure the responsible use of district resources and data, and maintain compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local laws governing research, surveys, data sharing, and confidentiality.

This guide provides researchers, evaluators, university partners, and district staff with the requirements and expectations for conducting research in FWISD. It outlines the approval process, application requirements, data access procedures, and participant protections necessary to support high-quality research while preserving the integrity of the educational environment.

Definitions and Scope

For the purposes of this guide, research refers to any systematic investigation, evaluation, data collection, analysis, or inquiry involving FWISD students, families, staff, programs, campuses, facilities, or non-public district data. Research may be conducted to generate knowledge, evaluate programs or practices, fulfill academic requirements, inform decision-making, or assess outcomes.

Examples of research activities include, but are not limited to:

- Surveys and questionnaires
- Interviews and focus groups
- Classroom, campus, or program observations
- Collection or analysis of student work products
- Use of student, staff, campus, or district records
- Program evaluations
- Grant-funded studies
- Graduate thesis or dissertation projects

Activity Types

To ensure appropriate review and oversight, FWISD distinguishes among the following activities:

External Research – Studies conducted by individuals or organizations outside of FWISD, as well as research conducted by district employees that falls outside their assigned professional responsibilities.

Program Evaluation – The systematic assessment of a program, initiative, partnership, service, or intervention to determine its implementation, effectiveness, outcomes, or impact.

Internal Administrative Data Use – Data collection, reporting, analysis, or evaluation conducted by FWISD employees as part of their routine instructional, operational, or administrative responsibilities for district purposes.

Research Eligible for Review

The District may consider applications for the following types of studies:

- University or research organization collaborations
- Graduate thesis or dissertation studies from current FWISD employees
- Independent program evaluations
- National, state, or grant-funded studies or initiatives requesting district participation
- Studies aligned with district priorities, initiatives, or improvement efforts

When Approval Is Required

District approval is required before conducting any research involving FWISD students, families, staff, campuses, programs, facilities, or non-public data. Approval is required for individuals or organizations seeking to:

- Recruit district participants for research activities
- Administer surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, or other data collection activities
- Conduct observations in district schools or facilities
- Access non-public district, staff, or student data

Who Must Apply

An application is required for:

- University-affiliated faculty, researchers, and organizations seeking access to district participants or data
- FWISD employees conducting research as a graduate student for a thesis, dissertation, publication, or other purpose outside of their assigned professional responsibilities

- Independent evaluators conducting program evaluations involving district participants or data

Initial Letters of Support

Researchers seeking support for an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application or grant proposal may request a preliminary letter of support through the online application process. To do so, applicants must complete the relevant sections of the application.

If a letter of support is granted, applicants may return later to complete the remaining application requirements. **A letter of support does not constitute district approval**. A complete research application and final district approval are required before any research activities may begin.

These definitions and requirements help ensure that research conducted within FWISD is reviewed consistently, aligned with district priorities, respectful of participant rights, and compliant with applicable laws, policies, and ethical standards.

Acceptable Research & District Priorities

Research proposals must be guided by clearly defined research questions and use appropriate, rigorous, and ethical methods. The study's conceptual framework, participant selection, data collection instruments, and analysis plan should align with its purpose and research questions. Researchers should also clearly describe the significance of the study and its anticipated benefit to FWISD.

Because research activities require district time, attention, and resources, FWISD prioritizes studies that align with district goals and provide a meaningful benefit to students, staff, schools, or the broader community. Preference may be given to research that:

- Supports student achievement and well-being
- Expands educational access and opportunity
- Evaluates district programs, initiatives, or practices
- Informs decision-making and continuous improvement efforts
- Generates actionable insights that can improve outcomes across the District.

Research conducted primarily for personal, academic, or organizational purposes, without a clearly demonstrated benefit to the District, may not be approved. Research conducted by FWISD employees pursuing advanced degrees may receive priority consideration when the proposed study aligns with district priorities and improvement efforts.

To minimize burden on students, families, schools, and staff, FWISD may limit the number or type of research projects approved during a given school year. The District reserves the right to suspend or discontinue acceptance of external research applications if the volume of requests creates an undue burden on students, families, or district staff.

Reasons a Study May Not Be Approved

Approval decisions are based on the quality and feasibility of the proposed research, its anticipated benefit to FWISD, the burden placed on participants and district resources, and compliance with ethical, legal, and privacy requirements.

A proposal may be denied or returned for revision if it:

- Does not demonstrate a clear benefit to the District or alignment with district priorities
- Is poorly designed, insufficiently justified, or lacks essential information
- Places an unreasonable burden on students, families, staff, schools, or district resources
- Disrupts instruction or interferes with school or district operations
- Raises privacy, confidentiality, data security, legal, or ethical concerns
- Duplicates existing district research, evaluation, or improvement efforts
- Requests sensitive or identifiable data without adequate justification or safeguards
- Omits required documentation, such as consent forms, research instruments, or IRB approvals

Even studies that present minimal risk may not be approved if they lack a clear purpose, are not methodologically sound, or do not provide sufficient value to justify the time and resources required of the District.

Use of Publicly Available Data

Before requesting access to district resources or non-public information, researchers are encouraged to determine whether publicly available data sources can adequately address their research questions. Many educational and demographic data are available through resources such as the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), Institute of Education Sciences (IES), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and publicly available district reports.

Researchers seeking information that may already be available through public records should review the District's Open Records Request process before submitting a research application. Using publicly available data when appropriate helps reduce demands on district resources and minimizes the need for access to non-public student, staff, or district information.

Overview of the Process

Researchers requesting to conduct research with FWISD are invited to submit proposals through our online application process.

1. Researcher reviews district requirements and guidelines

2. Researcher submits online application and required documents
3. Application is screened for completeness
4. District leadership reviews for alignment, burden, methodology, privacy, and feasibility
5. Request is approved, approved with conditions, or denied
6. If approved or approved with conditions, researcher receives approval letter
7. Researcher secures campus or department participation, if applicable
8. Consent and required agreements are completed before data collection begins
9. Research is conducted according to approved scope
10. Researcher submits required completion materials and final products

Submission Windows and Timeline

FWISD will review applications and send notification of approval or denial according to the timeline posted on the District webpage. Applications submitted during the dates for each submission window will be evaluated during the evaluation period, and requesters will be sent a response regarding the status of the request on or before the notification deadline. Only completed applications will be reviewed.

Review the timeline closely when considering whether to apply to conduct research with FWISD.

Application Requirements

This section outlines the application components, required information, and supporting documentation needed to submit a research request. Before beginning the application, applicants are encouraged to review this guide and download a copy of the application from the District webpage to prepare responses in advance.

Research proposals must address all required sections of the online application. Supporting materials—including survey instruments, interview protocols, consent forms, IRB approvals, recruitment materials, and other relevant documents—should be uploaded in the appropriate sections of the application. To expedite the review process, applicants are encouraged to combine multiple supporting documents into a single PDF whenever possible.

If you exit the online application prior to completing and submitting it, your responses will be saved for seven days, during which time you may return on the same device and complete the application. After seven days, your incomplete application will no longer be available. If you experience technical difficulties with the online application, please contact AskEval@fwisd.org.

Application: Introduction

Researcher Information

- Type of request

    - Full research or evaluation request (you will include necessary university IRB documentation)
    - Initial letter of support request (your university IRB document is pending)

- FWISD employee status
- Primary researcher name and contact information
- Researcher affiliation or organization
- Student status, if applicable
    - Faculty advisor or principal investigator, if applicable

Project Information

- Project title
- Data collection start and end dates
- Anticipated completion date

Application: Research Base

Statement of Purpose

- The purpose of the study in terms of the problem or need being addressed
- Why the study is important
- How the study relates to FWISD or public education

Research Questions

- Clear, focused research questions aligned to the proposed methods and data sources

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

- The theoretical basis, conceptual framework, or model guiding the study
- How the framework informs the design and interpretation of the study

Significance and Benefit to FWISD

- How the study benefits FWISD
- How findings may inform practice, programming, policy, or decision-making
- Why FWISD participation is necessary

Application: Methodology

Research Design and Methods

- Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach
- Target area or population: Schools, departments, grade levels, or programs involved
- Data analysis plan
    - How data will be analyzed
    - How findings will be reported

Application: Data Collection

Data collection methods

- Whether existing data are being requested or data are being newly collected

Requests for Existing District Data

Researchers may request existing data such as:

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Assessment results
- Grades or course-taking data
- Enrollment or demographic data
- Program participation data
- Graduation, completion, or outcome data

Applicants must specify:

- Data elements requested
- Date range
- Population or sample
- Level of data needed:
    - Aggregate
    - De-identified individual-level
    - Identifiable individual-level
- Purpose and intended use

District staff will review whether the data request is feasible. Some requests may require substantial staff time for extraction, matching, masking, or de-identification.

If you wish to use student data that are individually identifiable, you must obtain parent/guardian consent.

If you wish to use de-identified, individual-level data, a Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) may be required before any data will be released. A DSA defines the data to be released, its intended

uses, confidentiality protections, and procedures for data disposal at the conclusion of the study.

New Data Collection

- Identify participant groups:
  - Students
  - Administrators
  - Teachers
  - Campus staff
  - District staff
  - Parents or guardians
- Number of participants requested
- Rationale for participant selection, involvement, and time commitment

Data Collection Activities

- Focus Groups and Interviews
  - Interview or focus group protocol
  - Target population
  - Estimated time commitment
  - Location or virtual platform
  - Recording procedures, if applicable
- Observations
  - Observation protocol
  - Target population
  - Frequency and duration
  - Observation setting
  - Recording procedures, if applicable
- Surveys
  - Final survey instrument
  - Target population
  - Estimated completion time
  - Administration method and/or survey platform
  - Languages provided
- Work Products or Artifacts
  - Description of materials requested
  - Target population
  - How artifacts will be collected, stored, analyzed, and reported

Application: Privacy, Data Protection, and Confidentiality

Data Security Requirements

- Where will data will be stored
- Who will have access
- How access will be limited
- How recordings, transcripts, survey files, and datasets will be protected
- Whether data will be encrypted
- When and how data will be destroyed or returned

Confidentiality Agreement

Researchers must agree to:

- Protect the confidentiality of student, family, staff, campus, and district information
- Use data only for approved purposes
- Ensure that no personally identifiable information is disclosed in reports, presentations, publications, or other research products.

Applicants will be asked to sign the FWISD Confidentiality Agreement, in which they acknowledge and agree to comply with all applicable FERPA, state law, and district requirements.

Application: Consent, Assent, and Notification

Parent or Guardian Consent

Parent or guardian consent is required when:

- Students are asked to participate
- Student work products are collected
- Identifiable student data are requested
- Research involves sensitive information
- Required by law, IRB, or district determination

Student Assent

When appropriate, students should be given age-appropriate information about:

- The purpose of the study
- What they will be asked to do
- That participation is voluntary
- That they may stop participating at any time

Consent Form Requirements

Consent forms must clearly state that, while the study has received FWISD approval, it is being conducted independently by an individual or organization and does not represent or constitute research conducted by the District.

Additionally, consent forms should include:

- Purpose of the research
- Description of participation
- Time commitment
- Risks and benefits
- Data to be collected
- Confidentiality protections
- Researcher contact information
- Institutional affiliation, if applicable
- Parent or guardian permission options
- Language accessible to parents and guardians
- Translated versions, when needed

The researcher is responsible for distributing and collecting parental consent forms. A copy of each signed parental consent form must be submitted to the District prior to collection of any data.

Application: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Requirements

Applicants who are requesting an initial letter of support may complete this section at a later stage, after receiving IRB approval from your university or research organization.

When IRB Documentation Is Required

Educational research is generally subject to review by the IRB. Before research may begin in FWISD, applicants will be required to upload documentation of one of the following:

- In the case of research subject to review by an IRB, applications must include a copy of the IRB submission and provide a copy of the IRB approval letter before beginning research.
- In the case of research that is exempt from review by an IRB, the application must include documentation from the institution clearly delineating reasons for such an exemption.
- In the case of research not affiliated with any institution subject to IRB requirements, the proposal must include persuasive evidence that the researcher has carefully considered the potential risk to human subjects, especially students and families, and has ensured the appropriate protections in the research design.

Relationship Between IRB and District Approval

- IRB approval does not replace FWISD approval.
- FWISD approval does not replace IRB approval.
- Research activities may not begin until all required approvals are complete.

Recruitment and Participation

Participation in approved research is strictly voluntary. No department, school, employee, student, parent, or guardian is required to participate solely because district approval has been granted.

Likewise, district approval does not replace any school- or department-level permissions that may be required before a study begins. Participation by a school or department remains at the discretion of the appropriate school or department leadership.

Contacting Schools or Departments

Researchers may not contact departments, schools, principals, teachers, staff, students, or families until district approval has been granted, unless otherwise directed by the District.

Once district approval is granted:

- Researchers may contact and request participation from approved schools or departments.
- Researchers must provide a copy of the District approval letter when contacting schools or departments.
- School or department leaders may decline participation.

Selection of Schools or Departments

The promotion of and recruitment for participation in any approved study is the sole responsibility of the researcher. However, the District may assist in identifying appropriate schools or departments based on:

- Study purpose
- Population requested
- Burden on schools
- Alignment with district priorities
- Existing initiatives or research activity

Background Checks and Campus Access

Researchers and research team members who will have contact with students at a FWISD campus or district-sponsored event may be required to complete applicable background check procedures.

Researchers may be exempt if:

- They are current FWISD employees, as determined by the District
- They will not have contact with students
- Data collection is fully remote, record-based, or otherwise does not involve direct student interaction

Compensation and Incentives

Researchers may request permission to provide incentives, subject to district review.

- FWISD employees may not accept gifts exceeding district policy limits.
- FWISD staff participating during regular work duties may not receive compensation from external researchers unless approved and allowable by district policy.

Modifying an Approved Study

Researchers must request approval before:

- Adding or changing instruments or protocols
- Collecting additional data not included in the original application
- Expanding to additional schools or departments.
- Extending the project end date.

Requested changes as well as an explanation of why the change is needed should be submitted in writing to AskEval@fwisd.org.

Researcher Responsibilities

During data collection, researchers must:

- Follow the approved timeline
- Follow all conditions listed in the approval letter
- Obtain required consent before data collection

- Conduct only the activities approved by FWISD
- Use only approved instruments and protocols
- Minimize disruption to instruction and operations
- Protect confidentiality and data security
- Avoid pressuring individuals or campuses to participate
- Notify the district of issues, concerns, or proposed changes

When data collection is complete, and you will no longer be working with your participants, notify the District in writing by emailing AskEval@fwisd.org.

Upon completion of the project, an executive summary of the findings must be submitted to AskEval@fwisd.org. If your results are later reported in a more complete form (book, dissertation, journal article, etc.) you should provide FWISD with a copy for its professional library. As a condition of approval, the District retains the right to request and receive the results or findings of the research, the acquired data, or both.

Personal feedback to principals and teachers involved in your project is encouraged.

Providing an in-kind service to the school(s) in which you conducted your project is also encouraged. This might include volunteering to mentor or tutor individual students, serving as a guest speaker, or donating money or materials.