



Guidelines for Conducting Research in Atlanta Public Schools

Overview

This guide is to provide researchers with information on the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) research application and approval process. APS recognizes that district's educational programs and services can benefit from evaluation and academic study. Instructional practices and administrative procedures should be evaluated to ensure they meet the changing and differing needs of students. Educational research designed to achieve these purposes is encouraged in Atlanta Public Schools. Researchers are encouraged to review the [APS Strategic Plan](#) to learn about current strategic priorities in the district. The research request process is overseen by the Office of Research and Evaluation.

Research studies to be conducted in APS may be undertaken only upon authorization of the Superintendent or his/her designated representative. Each research proposal shall be carefully evaluated in terms of its demonstrated educational value to APS directly or as a contribution to the field of education, its ability to address an identified research priority of the district, its application of sound research methods, its use of APS students and staff time, and its compliance with state and federal laws.

This resource guide is designed to provide the following:

- Clarify expectations and requirements associated with seeking approval to conduct research at APS;
- Outline the steps required to prepare and submit a research request, as well as provide post-submission information and APS requirements upon approval; and
- Provide researchers with criteria by which the research review committee will evaluate requests

Process for Conducting Research

Anyone interested in conducting research in APS must have approval prior to starting any research activities. This includes university faculty and research staff, students, independent research firms, APS employees conducting research outside of their job-related responsibilities, government agencies, and other individuals or organizations interested in conducting research in APS. The following are examples of research activities that require approval by APS:

- Collecting primary data (through surveys, interviews, or focus groups) from students, parents, teachers, administrators, or other APS staff
- Conducting observations of school sponsored activities, including classes, staff workshops, parent teacher meetings, etc.
- Accessing administrative/secondary data (i.e., data that is not publicly available) to support research activities.

Researchers may contact central office department level leader to inquire about their support to sponsor proposed research studies. The Office of Research and Evaluation supports the use of research as a way to drive decision-making in APS. Hence, we encourage researchers to align studies with APS priorities so district leaders can use the results of research to further the individual goals of the department. Please note that having an APS sponsor does not guarantee the research application will be approved.

Approval to conduct research in APS is gained through the submission of an APS Research Request Application. The research review committee will review each research proposal and provide a decision within eight weeks of the submission date. Approval of a research study is valid for one calendar year (including multi-year studies); at the end of one year from the date of approval, research activities must cease unless researchers request and are granted an extension by submitting a request. Researchers wishing to use publicly available data do not need to submit a research application to the district.

APS Employees Conducting Research

APS employees are also required to submit an application to conduct research in APS. School based employees who plan to conduct research at their assigned school are simply required to complete the [Local School Research Form](#). This form must be approved by the school principal prior to starting research activities. School based employees who plan to conduct research outside of their assigned school must complete an APS Research Request Application. Similarly, non-school based employees (e.g., central office staff, etc.) must complete an APS Research Request Application.

Considerations for All Research Applicants

- Interference with school instruction and operations must be kept to a minimum. Researchers should work closely with school administrators to collect data before or after school hours.
- We have a legal and ethical obligation to protect the privacy of our students. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g and its implementing regulations) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) (20 U.S.C. § 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 program of the U.S. Department of Education.
- APS will carefully consider the best interest of its students and staff before granting access to them and their data. Any student or staff data provided to support approved research will be de-identified and will not be able to be linked to outside data sources (e.g., GaDOE, IPEDS, etc.). Data that is shared will be limited to what is determined to be directly relevant to the request as approved by the research review committee.
- Requesters have the right, consistent with scientific standards, to publish, present, or use from 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 expressed permission of APS.
- The Office of Research and Evaluation or school administrators may limit the time period during which research activities may be conducted in schools based on the administration of standardized assessments or other instructional or scheduling needs. Research activities may not be conducted in schools during the administration of standardized assessments. Please see the [APS Assessment Calendar](#) for more information.
- Data collection that will lead to the identification of students are strictly prohibited. This includes, but is not limited to, videotaping of students, identified student work samples, or identified surveys.

In addition, use of any student work samples or surveys must be clearly described and provided for review in the application and approval must be received prior to the use or implementation of either assessment tool.

- Researchers are strongly encouraged to use publicly available data and should review available public data sources such as [Georgia Department of Education \(GaDOE\)](#), [the Governor's Office of Student Achievement \(GOSA\)](#), [APS Insights](#), and the [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\)](#). Research requests that require data sharing agreements will require additional levels of review.
- APS strongly encourages external research projects that contribute to or complement the district's research agenda and strategic plan. Researchers are encouraged to design research studies that demonstrate clear and direct educational value to the district.

Required Consent Procedures

APS complies with all state and federal regulations regarding consent/assent procedures for human research. APS reserves the right to require written informed consent/assent for studies involving students, staff, or parents, even if it is waived by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) / Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB).

APS requires that researchers obtain written (active) parent consent before obtaining information from students. **Research studies with passive consent designs will not be approved.** If your proposal includes any multimedia research data collection (i.e., audio or video recordings) you must include consent for these activities as separate yes/no checkboxes (e.g., separate sections for participation in the research and/or for audio or video recording). The consent form should also include who will have access to the recordings, where the recordings will be stored, and when the recordings will be destroyed. Please note that video recording of students is prohibited. The participation of students, parents, and staff members in any research project is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time. If you are conducting a program evaluation, it must be clear to parents that research activities are not related to their student's school activities nor are they obligated to participate in your research in order to participate in any program activities. All consent/assent forms must be included in the application. Procedures for obtaining written parent consent must be outlined in the research application. APS teachers and staff are not required to participate in the distribution and collection of parent consent forms for research studies. Any plan to distribute and collect written consent forms should not include the use of APS teachers and staff.

Research Instruments

Researchers are required to provide copies of all surveys, assessments, observation instruments, and interview protocols to be used in the research study. The researcher must include information about the validity and reliability of survey instruments and assessments including citations. Procedures for the administration and use of research instruments should be clear in the application. APS staff may not be utilized to collect data or carry out research activities (i.e., administering assessments or surveys, etc.). Researchers submitting newly developed research instruments must explain why a new instrument is needed, what pilot test procedures will be used, and how the researcher will evaluate potential errors of validity and reliability.

Criminal Background Check

Upon written approval of the APS Research Application, all non-APS employee researchers conducting research that will require any interaction with APS students (i.e., classroom observations, student interviews, student focus groups, etc.) must be fingerprinted and clear criminal background check through the Office of Safety and Security – Atlanta Public Schools Police Department prior to the official research study start date. In accordance with [Board Policy GAK\(1\)](#), the fee for the criminal background check is the responsibility of the researcher. More information about criminal background checks can be found on the [Office of Safety & Security website](#). Researchers should not contact the Office of Safety and Security to arrange an appointment for fingerprinting prior to obtaining written approval to conduct research in APS.

Data Requests

Publicly available APS data can be found on the [Georgia Department of Education website](#), [The Governor's Office of Student Achievement website](#), and [APS Insights](#), the data website for Atlanta Public Schools. The Office of Research and Evaluation approval is not required for research that uses data that is publicly available. Requests for secondary data that is not publicly available to support research can be made through the research application process. APS data is available as aggregate data (i.e., group level school or district data) or individual student level data. Aggregate data is available where subgroups are greater than 10. All aggregate level data is de-identified and active parent consent is not required. Please see the [APS Data Sharing Process and Guidebook](#) for more information on data elements available for sharing.

Student level data is identifiable information on any subgroup of students and/or data on subgroups that contain fewer than ten (10) students. APS adheres to, and uses, the definition of personally identifiable information provided by FERPA. Requests for identifiable student level data requires active parent consent. The parent consent form must include a statement to authorize APS to release student records to the researcher for the purposes of the research study. A list of requested students records should be included on the consent form (e.g., student course grades, student state assessment results, etc.). Confidential data on individual APS teachers or employees will not be released.

Application Submission and Review Process

APS is committed to supporting relevant, well-designed research studies. Applications should demonstrate how their study would substantially benefit APS, its students, and/or staff. In addition, the following criteria will be used to evaluate the appropriateness of APS participation in the proposed research project:

- Proposed research or evaluation does not place undue strain on APS staff and student time and other resources
- Proposed research or evaluation should be of educational nature and relevant to APS
- Proposed research or evaluation is aligned with APS strategic priorities and/or equity commitments outlined in the [APS Strategic Plan](#)
- Proposed research or evaluation is supported by an APS district level leader or an APS Principal with a commitment to the use the results of the study to further the individual goals of the department or school.
- Proposal includes sound research methodology, this includes the use of reliable and valid techniques and/or instruments.
- Proposed research study is in compliance with human consent procedures and state and federal

laws, including FERPA and PPRA.

Electronic submission of proposals is required. **Applicants should carefully review the application check-list to ensure all supporting material are included in the APS Research Request Application.** Incomplete applications will not be reviewed.

Applications must include the following supporting documents:

- Institutional IRB approval letter (or letter of support from graduate program on official university stationary)
- Copy of all consent/assent forms
- Copy of all data collection instruments (surveys, focus group guides, interview protocols, observation rubrics etc.)
- Any recruitment materials that will be used in the study (e.g., flyers, recruitment letters/email drafts, enrollment forms, etc.)
- Letter of support from APS school administration or district level staff (optional)

If research will fulfill academic requirements, research proposals must be approved by the researcher's dissertation committee or department chair.

Research applications can be found on the [Office of Research and Evaluation website](#).

Application Review Process

The APS research review committee, which consists of staff across the Data and Information Group and other APS departments, meet regularly to review and discuss research applications. A decision to either approve or deny research proposals will be made within eight weeks of the date the application was submitted. The committee uses common standards for review and approval of research requests. Research proposals may receive a revise and resubmit request by the research review committee with the expectation that the researcher will modify their proposal where requested by the research review committee in the decision letter. When revisions are completed, the researcher may resubmit their proposal for additional review before a final decision of approval is determined. Research cannot begin until final approval is given. Resubmission materials can be submitted via email to research_screening@atlanta.k12.ga.us and are reviewed on a rolling basis. Researchers have up to 90 days from the date of the decision letter to submit their revisions. If the revisions are not submitted within 90 days, the research application will be closed.

Applications that are denied by the research review committee are deemed by the committee as having serious issues that likely cannot be addressed with a resubmitted application. Researchers whose applications are rejected are not encouraged to resubmit an application. Should a researcher believe their study can be revised to address the issues outlined by the committee in the decision letter, the resubmission should only occur after every point in the decision letter is addressed.

Post-Approval Process

All individuals whose application was reviewed by the committee will receive a decision letter. Please note that research activities may not begin until a decision has been made by the committee, including the recruitment of APS staff or students to participate in the research study. Approval to conduct research is granted for one year from the date of approval, unless the time period specified by the researcher is

shorter. Researchers whose studies will extend beyond one year must apply for an extension of research at least six weeks before the approval will expire. Approval by the research review committee means that the research proposal is methodology sound and it is likely to produce results that are beneficial to APS. Researchers must provide a copy of the research approval letter to principals whose schools will be affected by the research project to notify them of the research review committee's approval. Approval by the research review committee does not in any way guarantee approval from the principal. Researchers may only conduct research within a school if the principal is willing to participate in the study.

The researcher assumes the responsibility for conducting useful and high quality research. Upon being approved to conduct research, APS expects all researchers will:

- Abide by APS 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 the protection of human subjects (45 CFR 46, as amended).
- Keep all personally identifiable information (as defined in FERPA) confidential and not disclose information obtained through the research agreement without the written permission of APS.
- Not use data gathered for the approved study for any other purpose other than the approved study.
- Limit access to data to those representatives of the Applicant's institution or co-principal investigators with legitimate interests under the approved research.
- Follow the procedures as approved in the application and modify procedures and only use instruments with prior approval from the Office of Research and Evaluation.
- Conduct and complete the research study within the approved timeline and meet any stipulations accompanying the letter of approval.
- Comply with general standards of best practices in conducting research as outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) at http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/13127_Standards_from_AERA.pdf

Final Report

Upon completion of the study, the researcher must send an email to the Office of Research and Evaluation via research_screening@atlanta.k12.ga.us to notify the research review committee of completion of the study. A copy of the final report or summary of results must be provided to the Office of Research and Evaluation via research_screening@atlanta.k12.ga.us within 30 days of completion of the final research study report. Atlanta Public Schools reserves the right to use the information in the research report or summary for educational programming or services, planning, solicitation of grants, staff development, and any other purposes to improve instruction or services provided to students.

Reasons for Termination of Approved Study

APS may terminate research being conducted within the district at any time and for any reason. This includes but is not limited to research conducted outside the scope approved by APS; disruption at the research site; and notification of harm to research subjects.