



## **Guidelines for Conducting Research in Hillsborough County Public Schools**

**Prepared for:**

**Department of Assessment and Accountability Division of  
Academic Services**

**Hillsborough County Public Schools Tampa, Florida**

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Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS, the District) is the nation’s seventh largest school District, with over 200,000 students and 260 traditional and charter schools. Because of its highly diverse geography and demography, HCPS offers a wide range of contexts for conducting educational research and program evaluations. As a result, the District receives many requests to conduct research from a variety of individuals and organizations. This manual sets forth the guidelines, practices, and expectations for those requests.

## Purpose of the Research Application and Review

The School Board of Hillsborough County Public Schools (the Board) supports education-related research and program evaluation studies that apply rigorous and systematic procedures to get valid data relevant to the implementation and effect of education programs and to advance public education for District stakeholders. The Board further recognizes that individuals and agencies may ask for permission to conduct research in the school system. However, the Board also acknowledges its responsibility to ensure that research conducted in the school system is of high quality, safeguards the privacy of individuals, furthers the goals of the District, and minimizes interruptions to learning.

The policies and procedures within this manual apply to individuals and entities who would like to conduct research and/or evaluation activities in the District, or who would like to receive and use District student data and/or staff data for research or evaluation purposes.

The Superintendent or his designee must approve all research and program evaluation studies. Internal and external applicants seeking approval to conduct a research project within the District must go through the official review process.

The research application review process provides a mechanism to ensure that the following District expectations are met:

- The research is significant and aligns to the **District’s Strategic Plan**.
- The potential benefit to the participants and/or the District outweighs the nature or interruption of the research.
- The rights of the proposed research subjects within HCPS are protected. The US Department of Education has established regulations governing all education institutions that use human subjects in research activities (see [Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects](#), [Protection of Pupil Rights Act](#), [Family Rights and Privacy Act of 1974](#), [Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974](#), [Additional Protections for Children Involved as Subjects in Research](#), [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996](#) for more information). Research proposals must align with these laws to take place in the District.

## Reasons for Research and Definitions

Research comprises:

- Evaluation
- Measurement
- inquiry activities

- systematic investigation (including research development, testing and/or evaluation) designed to develop or contribute to general knowledge.
- collecting and analyzing information aimed at discovering unknown or additional facts and their correct interpretation to draw conclusions (including for evaluation of material purposes)
- quantitative and qualitative study activities such as observations, interviews, case studies, ethnographic analysis, analysis of written materials, secondary analysis of data, achievement testing, surveys, experimental designs to examine causal relationships, product testing, analysis of cost, and management records.

#### Researchers/Study Investigators include:

- Individuals not employed by Hillsborough County Schools (HCPS) staff or agencies not contracted with HCPS requesting to conduct research.
- HCPS staff requesting to conduct research for purposes or uses beyond their District role.
- HCPS staff wishing to conduct research within their District role that involves collaboration with non-HCPS partners or funding agencies.

#### Institutional Review Board

Federal and State Law mandates that any research that involves human subjects must have completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and received its approval. The IRB is an administrative body established to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to take part in research activities conducted under the auspices of those with which it is affiliated. To accomplish this purpose, IRBs use a process to review research protocols and related materials (e.g., informed consent documents and investigator instruments) to ensure protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects of research. Human subject is defined as: a living individual about whom a researcher or an investigator conducting research gets:

- data through intervention, or
- interaction with the individual, or
- identifiable private information.

Hillsborough County Public Schools also requires every participant research project to undergo review and approval by **BOTH HCPS** Research Review Panel (RRP) and an external to HCPS formal IRB. The HCPS RRP reviews all research applications seeking students, staff, administrator, parent and data access. This includes but is not limited to traditional, electronic, and PeachJar solicitation. HCPS requires submission of IRB approval from the institution with which the applicant is affiliated or an independent third-party agency *prior to HCPS application* review for data collection, analysis, and/or publication. HCPS reserves the right to request additional or clarifying information from the applicant including, but not limited to, a request for additional material or review of protocols, instruments, or other study materials. Additionally, HCPS reserves the right to refuse to approve a request if it is deemed the study might negatively impact the physical, emotional, or physiological health, education, nutrition, or general well-being of students, faculty, staff, and or other stakeholders.

## Fingerprinting and Badging

Hillsborough County Public Schools views all researchers collecting data as potentially, through the course of their work, having *unsupervised* contact with students and are therefore seen as vendors. As such, in accordance with Florida Department of Law Enforcement and Florida Department of Education (SB 1712), all researchers collecting data, register to be fingerprinted, screened, and badged through HCPS Human Resources office. This yellow badge must always be displayed and be present when at an HCPS school or site. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure all team members go through the proper fingerprinting and badging procedures as well as display badging appropriately. Click here for more information.

## Research Application Overview

The Research Review Panel (RRP) reviews and approves all complete applications submitted to conduct research in Hillsborough County. All forms are to be submitted *prior* to review by the RRP. The RRP is composed of highly qualified District Specialists in the areas(s) of interest. HCPS reserves the right to withdraw support for any research study or data request that defaults on the policies or conditions set forth in the Research Procedures Handbook and Research Review Panel decision letters. Failure to adhere to these communications may result in future research/institution relationships. While the District strives to provide researchers with an application decision within 45 days, there may be delays due to unforeseen circumstances. All RRP submissions are reviewed in the order received (new studies, amendments, continuing reviews, and responses to contingencies) except for current Hillsborough County Public Schools employees (see [Internal Applicants](#)).

### Application Categories:

To be considered for review, a complete application must fit into one of four categories:

1. Academic Study, Presentation, or Publication (peer-reviewed journal or academic text)
2. MA Thesis or Ph.D./Ed.D. Dissertation/Degree Program
3. State or National Study (other than reporting requirements mandated by the state or federal government)
4. Program Evaluation

### Application submission: *Effective July 1, 2023*

Hillsborough County Public Schools is committed to meeting the instructional needs of all students. Therefore, observations and disruptions to learning are not permitted. Research and data requests are considered and reviewed during all five points during the calendar year.

<b><u>Submission Due Midnight</u></b>	<b><u>Review Period</u></b>	<b><u>Projected Response</u></b>
August 1	Month of August	Mid-September
October 1	Month of October	Mid-November
December 1	Month of December/January	February 1 <sup>st</sup>
February 1	Month of February	Mid-March
April 1	Month of April	Mid-May

## Application Process

Applicants desiring to conduct research in Hillsborough County Public Schools must have an active application with supporting documents on file. The online application details the study by providing a summary, rationale, purpose, research questions, data collection methodology and procedures, analytic plan, burden, and benefit to District, description of consent/assent plan, any planned incentive(s), and an anticipated timeline. Required supporting, requisite materials should be submitted [via email](#) and include: formal IRB approval letter, all active consent/assent forms, HCPA Form A and all other items listed in the [Checklist and Forms section](#) of this handbook. Although requests to conduct research are accepted throughout the calendar year, research may not be conducted with student participants or on school campuses during certain times of year:

- the beginning of the year (August)
- during State Progress Monitoring or other assessment times (primarily September-October, January-February, and April -May)
- at the end of the year (May)

Additionally, certain schools may be "off limits" due to their involvement in state activities, grants, or other time-consuming projects as determined by the District. Refer to [Research and Evaluation website](#) for specific dates during which school, faculty, and student access will not be granted.

## Internal Applicants

Internal applicants should contact send an email to the Assessment and Accountability, [Department of Research and Evaluation](#) *prior* to completing an online application and materials submission. This email should contain the following research components: intent and purpose of the research request, sample population of research request, and request timeline. The complete application of a current HCPS employee will be expedited to the front of the queue for review.

## External Applicants

External applicants are considered those who are not current HCPS employees. This includes but is not limited to employees on academic, medical, or personal "leave". External applications will be reviewed in the order of online application submission and will not be "pulled out of queue". However, the RRP may be able to accommodate funding related deadlines with notice. The HCPS Research Review Panel reserves the right to determine if a study is expedited.



# Research Review Process Steps

Only complete applications will be reviewed in any given review cycle. Each review cycle window closes at 11:59pm on the [submission date listed](#) above. This includes the [online application](#) submission as well as all email correspondence, unless otherwise communicated from the Department of Research and Evaluation. HCPS RRP reserves the right to deny application requests if findings and or publications are not submitted as requested as a condition of acceptance. The review process involves:

1. Complete online application and requisite materials received [via email](#) by 11:59pm [of Review Cycle Submission Date](#)
2. RRP reviews application for completeness
3. Complete application candidates receive moving forward to formal review email
4. RRP formally completes a technical review of the request
  - impact of study
  - significance of study
  - alignment with HCPS Strategic Plan
  - availability of data elements requested (where applicable)
5. RRP formally completes content review based on:
  - interest
  - feasibility
  - benefit to all stakeholders within content area
  - burden to all stakeholders within content area
6. RRP solicits schools using researcher-supplied Flyer or solicitation email
7. Researcher is sent formal decision letter
8. 60-30 days prior to end of planned research, applicant will receive a Check-In
9. At the end of the study, a summary of the findings must be submitted to the RRP+

## Checklist and Forms

Applicants should complete two (2) application elements, an online application and email requisite materials.

### Online [Research Request Application](#)

All of the following must be completed:

**Summary:** Using non-academic language, address the following areas:

1. Why is this study necessary and important to HCPS *now*.
2. Who and how many participants are needed for this study (i.e., 6 middle school math teachers and 150 of their lowest FSA Math scoring students across 3 different schools).
3. How do you plan to conduct the study include group sample sizes, frequency of treatment, content area impacted (i.e., students will be in groups of 4 receiving twice weekly, 30-minute, small-group, intervention treatments from the researcher in the library during math class for 10 weeks).
4. Describe your research variables and experimental treatment *where applicable* (i.e., a study specific math computation skills pretest and posttest will be administered to the students. Half

of the students will receive this math intervention to aide in computation skills while the other 1/2 will receive instruction as usual from the classroom teacher.

5. What will Hillsborough County Public Schools gain from this study; and
6. What strain will this study place on the students, teachers, administrators, etc., Hillsborough County

**Rationale:** state what you intend to accomplish with this research.

**Purpose:** provides a brief statement of the contribution your work is expected to make to HCPS and your field.

**Research question/hypothesis:** briefly state the research questions you plan to address, along with any necessary hypotheses.

**Data collection methodology and Procedures** (sampling procedures, secondary data request): describe, in detail, the target population (i.e., grade level, number of schools, specific schools, etc.), sampling frame, and selection procedures for the proposed research. - detail the data security and data disposal plan. Data security plans should outline how all hard copy and electronic data are securely stored to prevent unauthorized access, disclosure, or loss. Data disposal plans should outline when and how data collected in a study will be destroyed and made irretrievable (for digital records- making sure to clear, purge and destroy data as warranted by the data type, risk of disclosure, and impact if that data were to be disclosed without authorization). If you are conducting federally tied research, regulations require that the data and related documents such as consent forms be kept in a secure location for a minimum of three years.

An example of data procedures might read: Only numbers which will be randomly assigned using a random numbering iPhone application will identify participants. Consent forms and data will be stored electronically on an external storage device. The device will be kept in a locked drawer to which only I have the key. At the end of two years, all files will be removed, deleted, and erased from both the thumb drive and the computer upon which the data was viewed.

**Detailed secondary data request** (if applicable): provide a detailed description of the variables you wish to include in your study, be as specific as possible. Please avoid broad or generic statements such as “demographic information” or “test results.” Be sure to include schools, special programs, or departments, where applicable.

**Analytic plan** (how are you analyzing the data): describe your expected analysis plan, including specifics regarding your treatment of the data, statistical or otherwise.

**Burden and Benefit to the District:** describe the burden that your research will have on the district – this applies for research with human subjects and secondary data requests. Depending on the research design, substantial time and effort may be required for staff to provide requested data with the selection and matching of records and concealment of personal identities. For proposals concerning human subject research, the proposal will provide a clear and logical rationale for the number of participants, the number of contacts, the total time required by each participant and when then the

interaction will occur. The research proposal will state the number of participants, specifying the role of each group of participants.

An example of the burden might read Seventy-four (74) math teachers in twenty-five (25) schools will be interviewed, sixty-five (65) students from seven (7) third grade classrooms will be surveyed, and four (4) principals from five (5) schools will be observed during the first two (2) weeks of February.

**Consent/Assent:** identify if you plan to use passive or active participant consent *and* why you have selected that method. Hillsborough County Public Schools requires all student consents and assents to be active, opt-in. If a passive opt-out student consent is submitted, it must be modified *prior* to being considered for acceptance.

**Student/participant incentives:** describe any participant incentives. Note, pursuant of 3210 (13) of the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Instructional Staff, HCPS employees, “...accept no gratuity, gift, or favor that might influence professional judgment”

**Timeline** (identification, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, completion, and write-up): must include start and end date of all research activities and data collection and/or expected dates for delivery of secondary data. Researchers/study investigators should also outline the time necessary to complete data collection and write-up. Please note, if research activities exceed one year beyond date of proposal approval, this should be discussed during Check-In and an extension must be submitted to RRP.

## Requisite Materials

All items listed below should be attached as **one** email no later than 11:59pm on the review cycle submission date to: [ResearchRequest@hcps.net](mailto:ResearchRequest@hcps.net). Be sure to include your name and research title in the Subject field of the email.

**Informed Consent(s)/Assent(s) to be used-** attach copies of informed consent forms that comply with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) guidelines. See [Consent and Assent](#) forms below for more information pertaining to requirements. Completed consent forms must be reviewable upon request.

**Study Flyer for Principal solicitation:** this will be included as an email attachment when HCPS solicits site administrators for your study.

**FERPA training certificate** (Institution-issued, CITI, NIH, HHS, etc.):

**Participants Letter of Invitation:**

**IRB Approval Letter:**

**Signed copy of HCPS [Access and Use of Confidential Data \(Form A\)](#):**

A copy of ALL instruments and measures (focus group questions, survey, etc.):

Graduate and Advance Graduate thesis/dissertation/capstone researchers should include all of the above with the addition of:

**a letter of approval from committee chairperson or graduate faculty advisor**

## Successful Applicant

A successful applicant is issued an approval number and formal approval letter containing the conditions of approval. The approval number should be used in all communications to identify the research as approved by the Research Review Panel (RRP). As a condition of acceptance, the Panel secured interested participants for the research study. However, it is up to the researcher to directly contact the site administrator(s) to set-up and organize site interactions. Additionally, if research activities involve the staff and or students during school hours, *the approval of the principal must be re-secured* prior to the voluntary cooperation of students or staff is sought.

An approval letter is an endorsement in any way of the research being conducted beyond its approval to be executed. A copy of the approval letter should be provided to anyone requesting evidence that the research has been reviewed and accepted by appropriate HCPS procedures and district personnel. All approved research conducted in HCPS is at the voluntary cooperation of the participants. Therefore, any participant may remove themselves at any time without penalty.

## Check-In

All research permissions end one year after the date on which it was approved. Check-ins serve multiple purposes. The most poignant is a “Check” on the research between 60 and 30 days prior to the scheduled end of the research request, ensuring that protocols have been executed without issue and will end as expected. The RRP will also use the opportunity to remind the researcher all agreed upon timelines, assurances, and expectations of all parties. At the completion of the research study, *the findings must be submitted* to the RRP and *may not be published or presented without HCPS written approval*. As a condition of the approval, Research and Evaluation retains the right to receive upon request the complete report.

## Extension/Modifications to an Approved Study

Extensions and modifications to approved research are vetted through the same process as initial requests. This is done to ensure that a continuation or change of the research request is not intruding on the time, instruction, and practices of staff, students, schools, or the District.

If an extension or modification is requested, *all changes* to the original, approved, study must be indicated on the *new* application. This includes but is not limited to study timeline, addition of research team members, changes to school sites participants, consent forms, the storage of data, any reporting plans alterations, as well as *any* changes to *any other protocol(s)*. Submitted participant consent forms should also reflect the respective change(s) and be up to date with IRB approval. An extension will be awarded once per research request. IRB approval is required for study modifications. Finally, HCPS reserves the right to deny a research request based on inaccurate or incomplete reporting of extensions or modifications.

## Assent and Consent Forms

Prior to conducting research activities or collecting student or staff information, consent must be given. Consent forms must explain to the participant and guardian what the researcher is doing the data being collected, who is going to see the data, how a participant may remove themselves from a study once it has begun, and who to contact should they have any questions. The purpose of a consent form is to ensure that all participants in a study understand and agree to take part. Assent may only be given if the participant is 18 years old or older. Participants under the age of 18 must be given permission by their legal guardian(s) to take part. Student participants 18 years or older may give their own consent. Assent and Consent can be given one of two ways: Passive/Opt-Out- where participants only bring back the forms if they **do not want to** take part, **or** Active/Opt-In- where participants only bring back the forms if they **want** to take part. Hillsborough County Public Schools requires the participants, or their guardians as deemed appropriate based on age, give their active consent. In the event that identifiable student-level data has been approved by the HCPS RRP, the researcher must provide valid, active consent from the parent or guardian on behalf of a student or from a student of who is of legal age or emancipated to secure the requested data. As a part of the review process, all consent forms must be submitted to the Research Request Panel for approval and must comply with the state and federal laws and regulations regarding the confidentiality of student records and the protection of study participants.

## Observation/Recordings

Audio and Video recordings are strictly restricted by HCPS to the following:

- All audio and video data captured is owned and stored by HCPS- not the researcher.
- Live streaming is **NOT** permitted.
- Consent forms are required for **all** participants in recorded data (teacher, students, administration, aides, etc.).
- Any person captured in the recording that does not have an “Active Opt-in” consent on file, **must not** be identifiable (blurred-out face, masked voice, etc.).

## Requesting Data

Requests to receive district and school-level data must go through the same process as other research requests. Student data is only released for research requests as anonymized and aggregate data unless a Data Sharing Agreement between Hillsborough County Public Schools and the institution or agency with which you are connected is agreed to and approved. Once the Research Request application is complete, the RRP will be in contact regarding the next step.

Data requests that take *more than one hour to fulfill* are charged with an hourly rate of \$125. Once secured, HCPS will share the data via a secure One-Drive access file to which the researcher will have 72- hour access from the time permission is granted, to secure. After the granted time allotment, access will be removed. Once downloaded from the HCPS secure server, the data must be kept secure and destroyed when HCPS approval expires or federal, state, or institutional guidelines dictate. The data provided cannot be shared with a third party without specific written permission from Hillsborough County Public Schools.

## Data Handling and Destruction

To receive access to District-held student or staff data, or to conduct research in the District, the applicant must sign and submit a copy of the [Access and Use of Confidential Data \(Form A\)](#). This form identifies requirements for the storage, use, maintenance, protection, dissemination, and destruction of data. Due to a variety of regulations regarding the collection, storing, and subsequent destruction of data, data should be stored for a minimum of 3 years providing the data remains secure. When research is completed, secure storing is no longer available, and/or the data are of no more use as a researcher, it is important to remember the confidentiality of your research participants throughout the process is of the utmost importance. Therefore, paper files must be shredded and cross-shredded or burned. Do not simply throw them in the trash. Electronic files stored on portable hard drives, “thumb drives”, CDs, or DVDs should be “erased” and physically cleared, purged, and destroyed. Electronic files on computers and “Cloud”-based servers should be erased using [commercial software](#) applications designed to remove all data from storage devices.

## Metrics and Instruments

Participants/guardians shall be informed of their right to view materials prior to consent in a reasonable amount of time. Therefore, all data collection materials (surveys, observation measures, questionnaires, etc.) must be made available to participants/guardians prior to consent.

## Prohibited Topics:

The following areas are prohibited and shall not be asked of students. Requesting information on these topics will result in the immediate dismissal of an approved request with implications for future research to be denied as well as potential legal action. Should a researcher wish to address the topics below, prior consent of the student if the student is 18 or older, or prior active consent of the parent of the under 18 students **must be obtained prior to asking the student**.

- The collection, disclosure, or request of personal information collected from students for marketing or for selling that information (or otherwise providing that information to others for that purpose).
- Requiring any student to submit to a survey/assessment that reveals information concerning:
  - political affiliations or beliefs of the student or the student’s parent(s)
  - mental or psychological problems of the student or the student’s family
  - sex behavior or attitudes
  - illegal, and anti-social, self-incriminating, or demeaning behavior
  - critical appraisals of other individuals with whom the student has a close family relationship
  - legally recognized privileged or analogous relationships, such as those of lawyers, physicians, or ministers
  - religious practices, affiliations, or beliefs of the student of student’s parent(s)
  - income (other than that required by law to determine eligibility for participation in a program or for receiving financial help under such program)

## Common Reasons for Denial

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS, the District) is currently the nation's seventh largest school District with over 200,000 students and 260 traditional and charter schools. Due to its highly diverse geography and demography, HCPS offers a wide range of contexts for conducting educational research and program evaluations. As a result, the District receives numerous requests to conduct research from a variety of individuals and organizations, but not all requests will be granted. With the size and diversity of staff, students, and contexts afforded by Hillsborough County Public Schools, the following are *some* reasons a request for data, or to conduct research might be denied. Though this is not an exhaustive list, and each request presented is considered within the context of several factors, please consider each reason prior to submission.

- Too much time taken away from instruction
- Too much time expected of students or staff
- Timing of request (during testing, end-of-year, etc.)
- Benefit to District is not clear, lack of alignment with District needs, sample size too small and not generalizable to larger body of students or instructional faculty
- Burden to the District is too high (time to gather data, requirements of students, staff, or resources)
- Conflict of interest; programmatic conflict/incompatibility
- Multiple requests for the same research topic
- Violates FERPA, Data Sharing Agreement/Protocols, Informed Consent

If an applicant has specific question(s) regarding a request denial, specific issues, or concerns, please contact the Office of Assessment and Accountability, Research and Evaluation at (813) 272-4341. Again, we thank you for considering Hillsborough County Public Schools and wish you well in your research endeavors.