

Research in K-12 Schools

Purpose and Scope

Research conducted in K-12 schools must adhere to federal regulations, ethical guidelines, and school district policies to ensure the protection of human subjects, particularly minors. Schools are autonomous institutions that retain the right to approve or reject research conducted within their facilities.

Researchers must obtain appropriate permissions, ensure informed consent, and comply with legal protections such as [FERPA \(Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act\)](#) and [PPRA \(Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment\)](#). The Longwood University IRB will review research protocols in accordance with applicable ethical and regulatory requirements to uphold ethical integrity and regulatory compliance.

Research Requirements and Considerations

Consultation Recommendation for Faculty Researchers

Longwood faculty who are planning to conduct research in K–12 school settings should consult with the Director of P–12 Outreach during the planning phase of their project. This consultation supports the development of a feasible research plan, facilitates identification of suitable school districts, and assists in initiating contact with the relevant school authorities and approval processes.

Researcher Roles & Responsibilities

Graduate students who are also teachers within the school or district must clearly distinguish their roles as researchers from their teaching roles. Researchers cannot use records they naturally have access to as teachers or communicate with students and families for research purposes without proper permissions.

Site Permission & School District IRB Processes

- Different school districts may have additional requirements or review procedures. Researchers should contact the school district early in the planning process to understand their specific requirements and incorporate them into their research proposal.
- When the school is [engaged in the research](#) the Longwood IRB will provide **contingent approval**; **final approval** is granted upon submission of a **Letter of Support/Permission** from the school. Engagement typically applies when researchers are accessing non-public information (e.g. assessment data, attendance, grades, disciplinary records etc.), requiring school facilitation beyond general recruitment, or involving school resources in a way that necessitates administrative oversight.
- **The Letter of Support/Permission must include:**
 - Study title
 - Scope and purpose of the research
 - Timeframe for research activities

- Name, title, and contact information of the approving school official
- Confirmation of the school's approval for research activities, including release of FERPA protected records.
- If a school requires amendments to the contingently approved protocol, those changes must be submitted along with the Letter of Support/Permission for final approval.
- **No research activities may begin at the site until final approval is granted, if applicable.**

FERPA & PPRA Compliance

- Schools determine their own compliance with [FERPA \(Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act\)](#) and [PPRA \(Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment\)](#).
- Researchers must design studies with these regulations in mind:
 - Student education records cannot be accessed without appropriate parental consent or FERPA exceptions.
 - Surveys involving sensitive topics may require parental opt-in consent per PPRA regulations.

Informed Consent & Assent

- **Parental Permission:** Active parental permission is required for all minor participants. Passive consent (opt-out methods) is not permitted under standard IRB review procedures. Exceptions to this requirement may be considered on a case-by-case basis. Researchers must justify how a waiver of active parental permission protects the rights and welfare of minor participants and must provide a clear, ethical plan for obtaining assent. All requests to waive parental permission will be reviewed by the full IRB.
- **Student Assent:** Once parental permission is obtained, minors must provide their own informed assent in an age-appropriate and developmentally suitable manner. Assent is an ongoing process and should be reaffirmed regularly. This process should be clearly explained in the protocol.
- **Non-English Speaking Participants:** Translated parental permission and assent forms must be provided when necessary to ensure full comprehension and informed participation.

Data Collection & Confidentiality

- Researchers **cannot use** student records accessed through their employment for research purposes.
- If student records are needed for research, explicit **parental consent** is required unless data is provided by the school under FERPA exceptions. The school must agree to release the records in their letter of support/permission.
- Audio/video recordings of students may require additional permissions and must comply with school policies.

Ethical Considerations & School Obligations

- **Avoid instructional time disruption:** Research activities should not interfere with standard educational activities unless explicitly approved.
- **Minimize undue influence:** Teachers and principals should not pressure participation.

- **Mandatory reporting:** Researchers who learn of abuse, suicide threats, or illegal activities must follow the school's reporting policies.

Email Recruitment & School Engagement

- Researchers may want to survey or interview teachers or staff from a school or district. If email addresses are **publicly available**, researchers may contact individuals directly without needing a letter of permission or support.
- If email addresses **are not public**, researchers must obtain a **letter of permission/support** from the relevant school official to access these emails.
- A simpler approach is to send a recruitment email to the school administration and request that they **forward the email** to the relevant staff. If an administrator chooses to forward the recruitment email, this is considered **implicit permission** to proceed with the study and a letter of support/permission is not required. Different school districts may have additional requirements or review procedures.
- It is expected that school administrators conduct their own due diligence regarding the recruitment and survey content before forwarding materials.

IRB Submissions and Amendments

- Initial IRB submission must include a detailed research plan considering school-specific regulations.
- **For contingently approved protocols where the school is engaged, final approval is only granted after the school provides written permission.**
- **For protocols relying on an administrator forwarding recruitment emails, no letter of permission is required. All recruitment materials must be provided in the protocol.** Different school districts may have additional requirements or review procedures. Researchers should contact the school district early in the planning process to understand their specific requirements and incorporate them into their research proposal.
- If schools require modifications to a protocol, researchers must submit those changes to the IRB before conducting the study.

Additional Resources

The [University of Virginia IRB for the Social and Behavioral Sciences](#) has extensive guidance for [Research in an Educational Setting](#). This guidance is a good starting point for researchers interested in conducting research in a K-12 setting. However, Longwood University is not bound by any of the policies on the UVA site and the Longwood IRB will evaluate all research in an educational setting on a case-by-case basis.

Document Attributes

Last approved by IRB: May 2025