Notes on Preparing Parental Consent Documents for Research in NYC Public Schools

Teachers College administration has been working closely with officials within the NYC Dept. of Education to find ways to facilitate the work of TC researchers within the school system. With this goal in mind, and in order to cut down on the number of revisions requested during the DoE’s review of an IRB application from TC, we have prepared the following “tip sheet” on preparing parental consent letters. The items below represent frequent concerns raised during review by the NYC DoE IRB,

1. Explain the purpose of the research thoroughly. This includes the research question and whether you intend to use data to publish a paper, for your dissertation research, to develop new instructional materials, etc.

2. Explain the research design thoroughly and without jargon. Even terms like “focus group” that are widely used in non-research contexts may be unfamiliar to the multicultural population of parents you are addressing.

3. List and describe each activity in which the child will be participating thoroughly. How long does each activity take? Will it be a single event or will participation take place over a period of time? Specify the duration of participation and the number of times the child will be participating.

4. Research with students in NYC public schools may not take place during instructional time (except in those instances where the research is observational, or undertaken while the researcher is assisting with instruction). This must be reiterated to parents, as well as a description of when and where participation will take place.

5. State clearly whether data will be collected anonymously or maintained confidentially. Researchers should take the extra step of letting parents know that data collected will not be shared with teachers or principals (when that is the case).

6. There are certain circumstances where researchers are legally required to break confidentiality, for example, if abuse is discovered or suspected or in situations where the possibility of a child doing harm to him/herself or others arises. THESE CIRCUMSTANCES MUST BE DISCLOSED TO PARENTS, but only when the nature of the research project makes such revelations a real possibility. Research into adolescent risk taking behaviors or home/family/social factors that may impact school performance are examples of research where this disclosure would be necessary.
7. Inform parents that in addition to their consent, the ASSENT of the child will also be obtained. Even if the parent consents for their child to participate, the child must agree to participate as well. Stress that their child may withdraw at any time without any negative repercussions.

8. Assent forms for minors must include a space for the researcher to witness the assent.

9. Any compensation, usually in the form of small gifts to the child, must be disclosed.

10. Note that the principal has approved data collection within the school.

11. Translations of consent forms for parents may be required, even if the study involves only children with native or near-native English proficiency.

12. Provide contact information for the IRB office at TC as a resource for parents to call with questions about their rights and their child’s rights as research participants.

13. There should be check boxes for parents to sign to give permission for audio and/or videotaping when necessary. Note whether or not the child may participate in the study if permission for recording is not given.

14. List the title of the research project on the document header AND at the signature line on multi-page consent forms.

Finally, two procedural notes:

1. Include an extra copy of the consent document for parental reference.

2. Consent documents may be sent home with children, but must be returned directly to the researcher, either in person or via a self-addressed stamped envelope. Teachers will not collect consent forms on your behalf.