

EVALUATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE BRIEF

for OAH & ACYF Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Grantees

June 2015 • Brief 10

Recommendations for Successfully Recruiting and Retaining School Participation in a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Impact Evaluation

This brief is a complement to the brief on “Recommendations for Successfully Recruiting and Retaining District Participation in an Impact Evaluation,” which is available [here](#). This brief shows a sequence of suggested activities that can be undertaken—after obtaining district approval—to recruit schools to participate in a teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) impact evaluation. These activities are similar to the steps used for district recruitment; both aim to secure interest and participation in the evaluation. Engaging schools in the recruiting process can help ensure high quality participation throughout program delivery and data collection.

The steps for obtaining school participation in an impact evaluation are: (1) Planning, (2) Initial Contact, (3) Additional Communication/ Stakeholder Meeting, and (4) Obtaining a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (Figure 1). Below, we present each step in a question-and-answer format, with best practices for recruitment highlighted throughout.

Figure 1. School Recruitment Process



Step 1: Planning

In the planning phase of school recruitment, the key steps are to:

- Identify potential schools to participate in the study
- Prepare materials for the initial contacts with the schools
- Secure letters of support from the district, if possible, to make a compelling case to the schools that their participation is valued and important

What should be considered when identifying potential schools?

The first step in the planning stage is to identify schools within the district that meet the study’s inclusion criteria. For example, two common criteria used in TPP impact evaluations are:

1. The number of students who are eligible to be served
2. Whether the school is currently offering TPP programming

Identifying which schools are eligible for recruitment early on can save time and resources. Much of the information needed to determine schools’ eligibility (for example, school size) can be obtained online. After you begin contacting schools, continue to review the study criteria to determine whether the schools will be able to implement the study.

What kind of materials should I prepare for initial contact with the schools?

The purpose of the initial contact with schools is to briefly explain the study and the program and to interest them in participating. We recommend preparing two initial documents: (1) an introductory letter and (2) accompanying additional details (for example, a frequently asked questions [FAQ] document).

- **Introductory letter.** This letter should provide basic information about the study and the program, addressing the key points of the study but not going into detail. It can be an adaptation

of the introductory letter sent to the district in the district recruitment process. You can modify that letter to explain that you have received district approval for the study and are inviting the schools to participate. Note that you will follow up with a telephone call and include your contact information.

- **Additional details (such as a FAQ).** The additional documents can provide more detailed information about the study and the program and address specific concerns schools may have about participating. The supporting documents could include a flyer, brochure, or FAQ. Ideally, they should be limited to two to three pages to convey key information to the reader efficiently. An example FAQ is provided as an appendix to this brief; it includes information on study timelines, incentives, and study burden—all common concerns and questions that schools have when considering participation.

With the introductory letter, it may be helpful to include as an attachment a complementary letter of endorsement or support from the district. A letter of support helps stress the importance of school participation and communicates that key stakeholders support the program and the evaluation.

BEST PRACTICES

Providing study details

It is important to strike a balance between providing schools with enough information to help them understand the key points of the study, but not so much that they are overwhelmed. Sometimes it will be appropriate to provide very detailed information right away; other times, it may be more appropriate to wait until later in the recruitment process to provide details.

Whom should I contact to get a letter of support for the study?

You can reach out to your primary district contact to request a letter of support for the study. Although the district support does not guarantee school participation, these letters can provide added legitimacy to your request for the schools to participate in the study. It may be helpful to give the district contact a draft letter of support and ask him or her to update it and provide a signature.

Step 2: Initial school contact

The second stage of school recruitment is reaching out and making contact with the school principal. The goal of the contact is to gain the principal's participation in the study and then move toward obtaining an MoU with the school. The following questions and answers provide common techniques and suggestions to increase the likelihood of gaining the school's participation.

How should I contact the principal?

The initial contact with a school should always begin with the principal. Ideally, the district contact will reach out directly to the school principal and will include you in this initial communication. However, it may be necessary for you to reach out to the school principal without the district contact serving as the intermediary.

When contacting principals directly, we recommend the following:

- Send background materials prepared in Step 1 to the principal via Priority Mail to help differentiate your information from the many letters principals receive.
- Send a follow-up email approximately one week after the mailing is received. The email should include electronic versions of the background materials included in the mailing. Keep the text of the email brief, but be sure to mention that you will follow up by telephone in the next few days.

Reaching the principal directly by telephone will likely take multiple attempts. When you speak with the secretary or gatekeeper, let him or her know you're following up on a study the district is participating in (it may be helpful to mention the district contact whom you have been working with) and ask for the best time to reach the principal. Also try calling early in the morning before school starts or in the afternoon after dismissal has occurred. During these times, principals are more likely to be in their office, increasing your chance of reaching them by telephone.

What should I discuss during the initial phone conversation?

Once you make contact with the principal, confirm that he or she received the introductory materials. If not, offer to resend the materials electronically or by mail, and proceed with explaining the program and the study. During this first contact, you will want to assess the school's interest in and ability to implement the study, and answer any questions the principal has about the program or participating in the study.

BEST PRACTICES

Protecting student information

Schools are concerned about protecting their students, minimizing the burden on their staff, and minimizing the loss of instructional time. Being sensitive to and addressing these concerns throughout the recruitment process will foster a positive relationship with the schools.

What should I do after the initial phone call?

The results of the initial phone call will vary from school to school and you will have to gauge next steps accordingly. The principal may be interested in moving forward with the study and may be willing to sign an MoU, in which case, skip to Step 4. In other cases, the principal may want to think further and possibly discuss the study with others, so additional outreach may be needed. If the principal is willing to move forward immediately, set up a second phone call and obtain his or her preferred mode of contact for follow-up communication. In other cases, the principal may refuse to participate in the study. Attempt to understand and address the principal's concerns, showing flexibility to the extent possible while adhering to the study requirements. If the principal still refuses, express your thanks for his or her time.

Step 3: Additional communication/ stakeholder meeting

The third step of school recruitment is moving beyond the initial contact with the principal and entering into more substantive discussions to encourage participation. This may include several rounds of conference calls and email conversations. It may also be necessary to hold an in-person stakeholder meeting to secure the school's participation.

During these subsequent discussions with the principal, you may need to inquire about including additional stakeholders in the conversation. Ask if anyone else needs to be involved in the discussion, such as assistant principals, curriculum instruction specialists, health teachers, or others. Although the additional stakeholders may not need to be involved in the discussion right away, it's important to know early on who should be included in the decision-making process.

When should the conversation shift from phone or email to an in-person meeting?

Recruitment can take a few weeks or a few months, depending on how many questions or concerns the school raises and how many people need to be involved in the discussion. Although

much of your communication may be conducted over the phone or via email, scheduling an in-person meeting with all the stakeholders is often the key to successfully recruiting reluctant schools. We recommend shifting to an in-person meeting once progress from phone and email conversations begins to wane, and the principal acknowledges that an in-person meeting is an appropriate way to proceed.

When should I plan for an in-person stakeholder meeting?

Use your judgment about when to request this meeting, but we suggest doing so once the principal is on board with the study and you have confirmed the school can implement the study.

When scheduling the stakeholder meeting, ask the principal who should be invited to it and confirm that the principal is available to attend. Having all the key stakeholders attend is essential to keeping the recruitment process moving forward and avoiding any later "surprises" that might stall your efforts.

What should be discussed during the in-person stakeholder meeting?

During the in-person stakeholder meeting, plan to do the following:

- **Review the details of the study design, focusing on the randomization process and data collection activities.** Ensure that all parties understand that (1) if they agree to participate in the study, the school or youth in the school have an equal chance of being randomized into either the intervention or comparison group, and (2) to be part of the study, they must agree to adhere to the requirements for the group in which they are placed. Explain the experiences of each condition. Stakeholders may have many questions about the program and the discussion may shift to focus more on the experiences of schools/youth in the intervention group; however, it is important to review the experiences of schools/youth in the comparison group as well.
- **Review the data collection activities and the general timeline for them.** Note that all participants—whether they are assigned to the intervention or comparison condition—will be asked to complete data collection activities.
- **Be sensitive to the school's concerns and the competing demands on staff members' time.** Outline your plans for the study activities, but remain flexible. Be clear about each of the steps involved, the time and effort required, the study expectations and requirements, and who is responsible for each step. You can present attendees with something similar to Table 1, which summarizes some key evaluation activities that require school participation.

Table 1. Data collection activities for the TPP impact evaluation

Activity	When	Length of time	Who is involved	Notes
Request rosters from the school	August	One time	Study staff will request rosters from the school; school will designate contact person	None
Distribute and collect consent forms	August–September	This can take up to several weeks—until 90% of the consent forms are returned	Study staff will be responsible for collecting forms, and will coordinate schedule with school contact	None
Administer baseline survey	September–October	At least one initial survey day and one make-up day, possibly more depending on the logistics of the survey administration	Study staff will administer the survey to youth in school, and will coordinate date and time with school contact	This must happen before ANY programming is received If there are technology needs, discuss those early on

Step 4: Obtaining a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

Once the principal (and any key stakeholders) agree to participate in the study, it is necessary to obtain an MoU with the school and principal. This is the final step of recruiting the school and provides the necessary language outlining the roles and responsibilities of the evaluator and the participating school, ensuring that everyone is in agreement.

What should the MoU include?

The MoU with the school will be similar to the one established with the district. It should outline the timeline for study activities, the responsibilities of the study team and of the school, and whether any rewards or compensation will be provided for reaching certain milestones. The MoU should be signed by the appropriate authorities at the school (usually the principal or his or her designee) before beginning any study activities. Though not legally binding, the MoU outlines the specific responsibilities and expectations of all parties involved and can be referred to throughout the study.

What are other considerations moving forward (after the MoU is signed)?

As you move forward with the study, it is important to remain in constant communication with the school contact. The letter would introduce the study and the study staff, and let teachers know that you will be working with them for a few weeks to collect parental consent. Note that you will try to be as minimally disruptive as possible and thank the teachers in advance for their cooperation. If you are planning to offer classroom-level incentives, you should note that in the letter. The letter can help avoid confusion and foster a positive relationship with teachers.

BEST PRACTICES

Communicating with teachers

If you will be interacting with teachers for the consent process, ask the school contact whether a brief introductory letter to them would be helpful—do not assume that the school contact has communicated anything about the study to the teachers.