

APPENDIX C: District Research Application (Generic Text Commonly Required)

Text for sections that will be commonly required in district research applications

Submittal Letter

Dear [Insert Name],

On behalf of Dr. Jesse Levin, Project Director, attached please find the American Institutes for Research (AIR) application for research clearance to include [School District] in the study sample for the U.S. Department of Education's Study of Weighted Student Funding and School-Based Budgeting Systems. AIR is conducting this study under contract with the Policy and Program Studies Service (PPSS) in the U.S. Department of Education.

We look forward to responding to any questions you may have about this study. Thank you sincerely for your consideration and anticipated cooperation.

Best regards,
[AIR contact]

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is investigate how districts vary in their implementation of weighted student funding (WSF) and school-based budgeting (SBB); outcomes in terms of levels of principal autonomy, transparency of resource allocation, and equity of resource distribution; interactions of WSF and SBB systems with school choice policies; and challenges that districts may have faced in transitioning to and implementing these systems. Data collection will include: a) a nationally representative surveys of districts and principals, and b) case studies of nine districts that are implementing WSF systems, including site visits, in-person interviews with district officials and school staff, and analysis of relevant extant data such as descriptive documents, budgets, and audited expenditure files. American Institutes for Research (AIR) is conducting this study on behalf of the Policy and Program Studies Service (PPSS) in the U.S. Department of Education.

The study will address four primary study questions:

1. How are resources allocated to schools in districts with SBB systems compared with districts with more traditional resource allocation practices?
2. In what ways do schools have autonomy and control over resource allocation decisions, and how does this vary between districts with SBB and other districts?
3. How has the implementation of SBB in districts using weights to adjust funding based on student needs affected the distribution of dollars to schools?
4. What challenges did districts and schools experience in implementing SBB, and how did they respond to those challenges?

What will my district be asked to do/what does participation involve?

The study includes the following three major tasks:

- 1) Conducting a set of **case studies** of nine districts implementing WSF systems, including interviews with district and school staff as well as an in-depth examination of extant information, to document the development, implementation, and perceptions of their systems
- 2) Performing an **analysis of audited fiscal files and budget data** from the case study districts to investigate whether the allocation of funding became more equitable and how the use of resources may have changed after introducing WSF
- 3) Administering a **nationally representative survey** of districts and schools in an attempt to better understand the perceptions of practitioners in across the country regarding their funding and resource allocation practices

The case studies will involve site visits to the nine districts and interviews with district and school staff and an analysis of extant documents describing the resource allocation process. The study team will conduct interviews with at least two district officials who are most knowledgeable about your WSF system (likely a budget director and a program director), a school board member and/or union representative, and three principals. Interviews will be guided by information gathered through a pre-interview questionnaire (which we will ask a district official to complete before the site visit) and a review of extant data collected from each site. As necessary, the study team will conduct follow-up telephone interviews for the purpose of obtaining missing information, but we will seek to limit this practice so as to minimize burden on your staff.

The preinterview questionnaire will collect information from each district including the year WSF was first implemented, the structure of the WSF formula (base funding allocation, student categories, and weights for each category), and the district official's perception of the extent to which a set of factors are current challenges to their WSF system, among other information.

The interview protocols will include questions and probes to investigate issues relevant to the study questions: equity, autonomy and accountability, transparency, system implementation, school context, and district and state policy context. Each protocol will include broad questions followed by focused probes to gather details about important areas.

We will include questions in the interviews on topics such as the following:

- How and why did the district decide to implement a WSF system?
- What kinds of funding weights are used, how were these decided upon, and how have they changed over time?
- Were there hold-harmless provisions used that were deemed necessary to facilitate the move to a WSF system?
- To what extent and in what areas have principals' autonomy over school budgets changed since WSF implementation?
- Was any training or support provided to district staff and principals? What did this training cover?
- How have the funding and resources provided to schools by central district offices and the resource allocation decisions of schools changed since the WSF system was implemented?
- What challenges did districts and schools experience in implementing the WSF system?

Our analysis of audited school-level fiscal files and budget documents will examine school funding equity and patterns of resource allocation before and after WSF implementation. A Request for Data and Documentation (RFD) will request the following from your site:

- Documents describing how funding and other (personnel and nonpersonnel) resources were allocated to schools
- Documents describing the school-level budgeting process, including governance structure, timing, training and support for schools, and roles of district and school staff and other stakeholders in the budgeting process
- Information regarding which school-level services were under the discretion of the central office versus school sites prior to and after implementation of the WSF system
- Final audited end-of-year school-level fiscal files, including expenditures and revenues for at least five years prior to WSF implementation and for at least five years after implementation (but ideally for all post-WSF years), recognizing that the five-year minimum may not be possible for districts that are more recent implementers
- School-level budgets and budget narratives for at least three years prior to and three years after (if available) WSF implementation
- School improvement plans or other program plans

The RFD will also include instructions on how to provide a site-level fiscal data file (i.e., records specific to individual schools and other accounting cost centers, such as central office departments or programs), via an FTP site or other secure transfer method.

The district Chief Financial Officer or Superintendent will also receive an invitation to participate in a national survey of districts, and a sample of principals in your district will receive an invitation to participate in a national survey of principals. Both surveys are expected to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Collection of survey data from district officials and school leaders is designed to gather staff perceptions surrounding funding and resource allocation practices as well as shed light on how the reported practices in SBB districts may differ from those in non-SBB districts.

For Survey Only Districts

What will my district be asked to do/what does participation involve?

The district Chief Financial Officer or Superintendent will receive an invitation to participate in a national survey of districts. In addition, up to 6 principals in your district will receive an invitation to participate in a national survey of principals. Both surveys are expected to take approximately 20-30 minutes. Collection of survey data from district officials and school leaders is designed to gather staff perceptions surrounding funding and resource allocation practices as well as shed light on how the reported practices in SBB districts may differ from those in non-SBB districts.

District and principals surveys will be administered through a Web-based platform to streamline the response process. Paper and telephone versions of the survey will be available for those that would prefer not to respond by web. A toll-free number and e-mail address will be available during the data collection process to permit respondents to contact interview staff with questions or requests for assistance. The toll-free number and e-mail address will be included in all communication with respondents.

How will we protect participants and data collected?

A top priority of the study team is maintaining the confidentiality and security of study data, and following AIR and federal guidelines regarding the protection of human subjects in research. The project staff has extensive experience collecting information and maintaining the confidentiality, security, and integrity of interview data. The study's Principal Investigator, Dr. Jesse Levin, also sits on AIR's Institutional Review Board. All members of the study team have obtained certification on the use of human subjects in research, having completed a training that addresses the importance of the confidentiality assurances given to respondents and the sensitive nature of handling data. The team has already sought and received approval for this study from AIR's IRB, thereby ensuring that the data collection protocols comply with professional standards and government regulations designed to safeguard research participants. We will abide by the following data protection procedures:

- The study team will protect the identity of individuals from whom we collect data for the study and will use them for research purposes only. Respondents' names will be used for data collection purposes only and will be disassociated from the data prior to analysis. Though case study sites will be named, individual respondents will not be named, nor will quotes or statements be attributed to roles at individual sites, so that these respondents will not be able to be indirectly identified.
- Although this study will not include the collection of sensitive information (the only data to be collected directly from case study participants will focus on district and school policies and practices rather than on individual people), a member of the research team will explain to participants what will be asked in the interviews, how the data will be used and stored, and how their confidentiality will be maintained. Participants will be advised that they may stop participating at any time. The study's goals, data collection activities, participation risks and benefits, and uses for the data will be detailed in an informed consent form that all participants will read and sign prior to being interviewed. This information also is included in the RFD. The signed consent forms collected by the site visit project staff will be stored in secure file cabinets at the contractors' offices.
- All electronic data will be protected in three ways. First, AIR's internal networks are protected from unauthorized access, including with firewalls and intrusion detection and prevention systems. Second, access to computer systems is password protected, and network passwords must be changed on a regular basis and conform to organizational strong password policies. Third, the networks also are configured so that individual employees are only granted access to files on the local area network approved for their use by study directors. Access to all electronic data files and workbooks associated with this study will be limited to researchers on the case study data collection and analysis team.