

Consent Form Return Rates for Third-Grade Urban Elementary Students

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Objective: To maximize active parent consent form return rates for third-grade minority, urban students enrolled in predominantly low-income elementary schools in Chicago, Ill. **Methods:** Research staff used a class incentive and class visits to retrieve consent forms from students. **Results:** Of the 811 third-grade students, 98% returned a form and 79% (n = 627) of those students'

parents provided an affirmative response. Return rates did not vary by students' ethnicity or by the schools' demographic variables. **Conclusion:** Incentives and class visits can yield a high return rate of active parent consent forms for third-grade minority, urban, low-income students.

Key words: parent consent, elementary students

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Most research involving elementary and secondary school students uses active parental consent procedures. An active consent procedure requires parents to sign a consent form, indicate if they will allow their child to participate in the study, and return this form to the researcher. An ongoing concern is achieving a high return rate of consent forms from the students' parents. Problems with active consent are well established in the literature and

include a low return rate,¹⁻³ sampling bias,²⁻⁶ and a drain on project resources, personnel, and time to achieve a high return rate.⁷⁻⁹

Most studies have reported consent form return rates from a predominately white student population. Few studies have reported return rates from student populations from different ethnic backgrounds, who live in urban areas, or come from low SES backgrounds. These rates are important because a high return rate is necessary to effectively conduct research with students from different backgrounds. When studies report the return rates from nonmajority student populations, the rates tend to be low, and a low percentage of parents allow their child to participate in the research.^{7,10-13}

Furthermore, few studies have reported return rates for elementary grade students (grades K - 6). Most studies report only the overall consent rate for the student sample. For example, Thompson obtained consent forms from an elementary school population (grades K - 6).¹¹ However, the study only reported that consent rates decreased from kindergarten (91%) to sixth grade (69%). Mostow et

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al reported a 67% return rate for first- and second-grade students.¹⁴ Noll et al reported an overall 95% “yes” rate for students in grades 1-7, but return rates were not reported for grades 2-5.⁵ In each study, rates were not reported for specific grade levels. Reporting consent rates for specific grades would be helpful for researchers in estimating potential sample sizes for grade-specific evaluations or interventions.

A study by Fletcher and Hunter reported that the overall return rate for third-grade students enrolled in 8 schools was 95%, and overall, 85% of parents who returned the form allowed their child to participate.¹⁵ In 2 of the 8 schools, the majority of the students were African American and were from low SES backgrounds. In those schools, the return rates were 86% and 96%, and respectively, 93% and 87% of parents who returned the form allowed their child to participate.

Research has suggested that to achieve a high return rate for parental consent forms in research, multiple procedures and attempts are necessary. In addition, having the support of the school’s administration, securing the assistance of school-based personnel, offering incentives, and having research members who are actively collecting forms have been suggested to be important for achieving a high return rate.¹⁵ In Fletcher and Hunter’s study, teachers were offered a \$5 gift certificate for each consent form that was returned by a third-grade student in their class.¹⁵ The consent form collection and distribution waves were spaced one week apart. In the final data collection wave, the staff contacted parents to remind them to return the form.

This paper will report return rates for a third-grade student population from various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, who were enrolled in 14 elementary schools in the urban Chicago area. Using an active consent procedure, we obtained parents’ permission for their children to participate in a survey to evaluate the effects of a school-based prevention program. We will report the effectiveness of using incentives and daily visits to classrooms to collect the active consent forms.

METHOD

School Demographics

Our target population was third-grade

students enrolled in Chicago Public Schools. We obtained lists for 2 types of elementary schools--schools with students enrolled in grades Kindergarten through sixth grade (K-6) and Kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8). Schools had to enroll students who resided in the community where the school was located.

Demographic data for each of the schools were obtained from the Chicago Public School System website.¹⁶ Because one aim of the prevention program was to increase student achievement, schools where greater than 50% of students passed the Illinois State Achievement Test were excluded. We also excluded schools where less than 50% of its students were enrolled in a free-lunch program because we were interested in testing the effects of the intervention in schools with predominately low-income student populations. Using these criteria, we narrowed our initial list of 68 schools that were eligible to participate. We approached these schools, and 14 of them agreed to participate in the main study. A series of independent t-tests indicated that the 14 schools that we recruited were not significantly different from the remaining 68 schools that were not part of the study. Table 1 shows the schools’ demographic information and the t-test results.

Materials

Parent consent form. The parent consent form was a 2-page document which asked if parents would allow their child to participate in a confidential survey about their child’s behavior and attitudes about school and other social situations, and if they would permit the release of school records to the research staff (Appendix A). The form described the project’s intent, requirements of participation, and the known risks and benefits. Contact information for both the project director and the institutional review board were provided. Parents/guardians were asked to print their child’s name, to check a box to indicate whether or not they would consent to having their child participate in the study, and to sign and date the form. The parent’s decision was valid for as long as the child was enrolled in the school, and the child could be withdrawn from the study at any time. The same information was printed in Spanish on the back side of the form.

Principal support letter. To increase

Table 1
School Demographic Information, t-test Results, and Return Rates by School

	Schools in Main Study		Schools Not in Main Study		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Total School Enrollment	589.1	164	610.5	145.2	0.48
% of white Students Enrolled	11	15.8	7.9	14.7	-0.69
% of Black Students Enrolled	53.9	44.2	57	43.8	0.23
% of Hispanic Students Enrolled	30.4	32.8	32.6	36.7	0.21
% of Asian American Students Enrolled	44.1	65.4	2.4	5.2	-1.23
% of Students Meeting Minimal State Achievement Test Criteria	34	10.6	34.1	12.3	0.04
% of Students Receiving a Free Lunch	90.1	52.9	90.9	9.9	0.31
School Attendance Rate	93.6	1.2	92.9	1.9	-1.17
School Truancy Rate	1.6	1.6	3.4	4.6	1.40
School Mobility Rate	28.1	9.4	30.9	15.6	0.64
% of Consent Forms Returned	98.3	2	—	—	—
% of Returned Consent Forms with a YES Response	79.7	8.9	—	—	—

Note.

Schools in Main Study = 14; schools we approached but not in main study = 68.

% of students receiving a free lunch indicates low-income students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. School attendance rate is defined as the number of days a student attended school divided by the total number of days a student attended school and was absent from school. School truancy rate is defined as the number of students who are truant divided by the average daily student enrollment. School mobility rate reflects any enrollment change between the first school day in October and the last day of the school year. It is the sum of the students who transferred out and the students who transferred in, divided by the average daily enrollment.

return rates, past studies have recommended including a letter of support from the school administrator with the consent form.^{2,17,18} The support letter provided a short summary of the research, explained the purpose of the consent form, and informed parents that the school supported the research (Appendix B). The letter was printed on the school's letterhead and signed by the school's principal or assistant principal.

Procedure

Consent forms were collected during September 2004. Research staff visited each classroom and distributed a form for each student to take home to his or her

parents. The mean number of students per classroom was 23.17 (min = 14, max = 32). As an incentive, the staff offered a pizza party for all the students if consent forms were returned from 90% or more of the students. Staff also provided each classroom with a large visual "thermometer" that displayed the percentage of forms that were returned so that the teacher and students could see how close they were to obtaining their goal. Because teachers were instrumental in assisting staff with distributing and collecting consent forms, we offered them a gift certificate if 90% of the students returned the form.

We obtained a third-grade roster list

Table 2
Comparison of Return Rates by School's Ethnic Group

Return Rate	Ethnic Group	M	SD	F
Total % of Consent Forms Returned	Black	97.33	2.80	1.51
	Mixed	98.75	1.49	
% of Parents Who Gave Permission to Allow their Child to Participate in the Study	Black	79.33	10.01	0.40
	Mixed	76.13	8.82	

Note.
Schools with predominately Black student enrollment, N = 6.
Schools with predominately mixed ethnic group student enrollment, N = 8.

from each school to determine how many students were eligible for the study. For each returned form, we recorded the name of the student, the parent's decision to allow or not allow the child to participate in the research, and the date the consent form was distributed and collected. After the staff visited a classroom to collect the returned forms, we cross-referenced the list of students who returned a form with the roster to create a "target list" to identify which students had yet to return a completed form. A staff member visited a classroom in the morning for 2 to 4 consecutive days to collect consent forms. The mean return rate after the first visit was 67%, and a mean of 4 consent forms per classroom remained to be collected on subsequent visits.

RESULTS

A consent form was returned for 796 out of 811 third-grade students enrolled in the participating schools (98%). Of the parents who returned a form, 79% (n = 627) agreed to have their child participate in the study.

We examined if return rates were different across schools that had a mixed ethnic group student enrollment or a predominately Black student enrollment. There was no significant difference between the Black and mixed-ethnic schools for the total return rate and the percentage of parents who consented to allow their child to participate in the study (Table 2). We examined if return rates varied by the school's demographic variables. None of the correlations were significant (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Our return rate for this sample of third-grade students from various ethnic backgrounds in low SES inner-city areas was 98%. The results are in contrast to most past research which suggests that students from minority and low SES backgrounds have low return rates.¹⁰ Correlations between the average student SES level for each school and its return rate were not significant, but low variability in SES in this selected sample of schools may explain this. There were also no differences in the return rates between schools that enrolled predominately Black students and students from different ethnic groups. This finding is also in contrast to past research.¹⁰ Although we did not have a comparison sample of schools that enrolled predominately white students, the high return rate from our sample's schools is noteworthy.

Consistent with prior research, we used multiple methods and incentives to maximize the return of forms. It is difficult to isolate if any one incentive or procedure yielded a higher percentage of returned forms. The classroom incentive might have been effective because it increased student motivation to remind each other to return the form. The incentive for the teachers communicated our appreciation for their efforts to collect the forms. In addition to working with the teacher to collect forms, our staff explained the research to them so they were aware of why collecting all of the consent forms was important. The elementary school setting also may have been a facilitating factor. In elementary schools, students

Table 3
Pearson Correlations Between Consent Rates and School Demographic Variables

	Total % of Consent Forms Returned	% of Parents Who Gave Permission to Allow Their Child to Participate in the Study
% of Students Meeting Minimal State Achievement Test Criteria	0.2	0.3
School Attendance Rate	0.15	0
School Truancy Rate	-0.01	-0.28
% of Students Receiving a Free Lunch	-0.29	0.25
School Mobility Rate	0.12	-0.37
Total School Enrollment	-0.31	-0.17

Note.

N = 14 Schools.

% of students receiving a free lunch indicates low-income students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. School attendance rate is defined as the number of days a student attended school divided by the total number of days a student attended school and was absent from school. School truancy rate is defined as the number of students who are truant divided by the average daily student enrollment. School mobility rate reflects any enrollment change between the first school day in October and the last day of the school year. It is the sum of the students who transferred out and the students who transferred in, divided by the average daily enrollment.

generally are in self-contained classrooms that consist of only one teacher and the same set of students. A classroom incentive may not be as effective in secondary schools (middle/junior high schools or high schools) given that students typically change classrooms and teachers during the day.

The research staff made daily visits to classrooms, and by our third visit we had collected all the consent forms we would get. This result is consistent with Ji et al, who found that 3 was the maximum number of attempts that showed any significant gains in the number of consent forms retrieved.¹⁷ In addition, our staff collected 67% of the consent forms one day after the first distribution. This result is consistent with Fletcher and Hunter, who reported that the majority of the forms they collected were received within 2 days of being sent home.¹⁵ It appears that daily visits were needed to collect the forms, because most students who received the form would return it the

next day. The short lag-time between visits served as a visible and consistent reminder for the students to return the forms.

The percentage of parents who gave permission for their child to participate in the study (79.7%) was slightly lower than that in Fletcher and Hunter's sample (93% and 87%).¹⁵ Without normative data, it is difficult to determine if this difference is significant. One possible explanation for the difference is that Fletcher and Hunter contacted parents by telephone to encourage them to return the consent form.¹⁵ We did not use phone contacts. Alternatively, the difference in the percentage of parents who allowed their child to participate between our sample and their sample could simply be due to chance.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to the rates reported from past research, we obtained a high return rate of active consent forms from parents

of third-grade students from diverse ethnic groups and from low SES backgrounds. Results of this study support previous research that indicate that daily visits by our project staff and multiple incentives for the classroom's students and the teacher can result in enhanced consent form rates. Future research could experimentally manipulate different types of consent form retrieval procedures in order to isolate which procedures yield high return rates for different types of student populations. Furthermore, research could also incorporate measures of school and family factors, such as the parents' trust of the school's administrators and teachers and the relationship quality between the child and his or her parents, to investigate if these factors could potentially lead to a high consent form return rate.

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Appendix A School Consent Form

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM School Name: _____ Date: _____
Evaluation of Social and Character Development Programs
U.S. Department of Education

A) PLEASE CHECK EITHER BOX #1 or #2

#1. I GIVE PERMISSION for my child(ren) (3rd graders only),

(print child's name) and (print child's name)

to complete surveys about his/her behaviors and beliefs about social situations and for the school and teachers to provide requested information for research purposes. I understand that I will be asked to complete a brief survey about my child(ren)'s behavior and our home periodically throughout the study, and that I may decline to answer any questions that I do not want to answer. My consent is valid while my child is in any CPS school during the 3-year study period. I understand that I or my child(ren) can withdraw at anytime.

Would you like the parent survey in another language? If so, specify language preference:

#2. I DO NOT GIVE PERMISSION for my child(ren) (3rd graders only),

(print child's name) and (print child's name)

to participate in the survey and I decline to have teachers and the school provide additional requested information for research purposes.

B) PLEASE SIGN AND COMPLETE

SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR GUARDIAN

DATE

YOUR FULL NAME (PLEASE PRINT) _____

If you checked #1, please provide your phone number and address and the contact information of one other person (friend or relative), with whom you are not currently living, who will always know how to reach you.

HOME PH: (____) _____ WORK PH: (____) _____ CELL PH: (____) _____
(AREA CODE) (AREA CODE) (AREA CODE)

STREET ADDRESS _____

CITY STATE ZIP _____

FRIEND OR RELATIVE

NAME OF FRIEND OR RELATIVE _____

PHONE (____) _____ STREET ADDRESS _____
(AREA CODE)

CITY, STATE, ZIP _____

C) PLEASE RETURN THIS PERMISSION FORM TO YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL TEACHER AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. THANK YOU!

Appendix B
Parent Support Letter

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Our school is one of only a small number of schools selected to participate in the Social and Character Development Research Project. The project comes from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and is conducted by (Principal Investigator). The Social and Character Development Research Project will evaluate the *Positive Action* program that is being offered by our school. The *Positive Action* program teaches children to do positive behaviors that are good for them and good for others. There are no costs to you or the school for participation in this research study; indeed, the schools, parents and teachers will receive a stipend for their participation. Chicago Public Schools has approved this project and all procedures.

This letter is to communicate our support for (Principal Investigator's) team as they demonstrate the beneficial effects of the *Positive Action* program in schools. All students in our school will receive the program. Accompanying this letter is important information for parents regarding the research component of the project. **Please review this information and return the completed form as soon as possible.**

I am very excited about the opportunity for the Chicago Public School system and <insert school name> to be involved in this important community project. We will be working with (Principal Investigator's) team to do everything possible to help our schools and communities improve the lives of our students.

Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Chicago Public School Principal