Effective Practices to Improve Recruitment, Retention, and Partnerships in School-Based Studies

Laureen H. Smith, PhD, RN, FAAN, & Rick L. Petosa, PhD

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Schools are essential settings for research that tests the effectiveness of health educational interventions in natural settings (classrooms). There are several reasons schools are important research settings. First, public schools serve over 50 million youth, and private schools serve an additional 5 million youth (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Most school-aged children are served by formal schools and spend most of their waking hours in school settings. Second, schools serve as a focus of community activity and identity. Many schools host community events including after-school programs, summer programs, community meetings, and official polling locations for elections.

Laureen H. Smith, Associate Professor and Director of Community Outreach and Engagement, College of Nursing, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

Rick L. Petosa, Professor, College of Education and Human Ecology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

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Correspondence: Laureen H. Smith, PhD, RN, FAAN, 240 Newton Hall, 1585 Neil Ave, Columbus, OH 43210; e-mail: smith.5764@osu.edu.

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Third, school settings enable health programs to efficiently reach large numbers of children and their families. Strong partnerships with school personnel and stakeholders enhance the reach and impact of these programs. Although schools are an important setting for recruitment efforts, there are also important barriers to using schools as a setting for research projects. The purpose of this article is to describe challenges to implementing scientific studies in schools and ways to develop effective practices to improve recruitment and retention and to sustain partnerships in school-based studies. A series of practical strategies for effective collaboration between schools and research projects will be shared.

SCHOOL AND SCIENTIFIC DEMANDS
With a call for broader dissemination and translation of research into real-world settings, the need for school-based studies has increased. Concurrently, the need for scientific rigor has led to complex research designs, randomization, theory-based interventions, and sophisticated measurement. Increasing scientific rigor applied to school settings has introduced additional concerns and complexities that schools and investigators may not have accounted for in the past. The needs for randomized controlled trials, long-term follow-up, objective and biological measurements instead of

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questionnaires, and multilevel analysis plans introduce challenges and barriers to school-level understanding and, ultimately, academic–school partnership success. Without understanding the rigor required of research methods, school stakeholders may have concerns about withholding effective programs, delayed treatment, or comparing a "new" program with an established program. Studies that require pulling children out of class are a major concern for schools striving to meet core curricular demands.

Research design demands may be at odds with the purposes and policies of the schools. Under current federal and state laws, schools face pressures of standardized test performance and negative consequences for schools that do not produce adequate yearly progress. Schools are focused on meeting core curricular standards and policies. Participation in a research study may further stretch resources (instructional time) and pose concerns about the impact on academic progress measures. For example, schools often do not want to use curricular time during regular school hours as time dedicated to a research intervention. To address school concerns, researchers and school staff should engage in active problem solving to design protocols and procedures from the earliest stages. Early involvement of school stakeholders in planning phases strengthens the academic–school partnership. It also sets the stage for effective recruitment, improved participation in protocols, and program sustainability.

BUILDING SCHOOLS INTO RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION PLANS

One of the most challenging obstacles for researchers conducting school-based studies is obtaining a sufficient sample size. Generally, research designs require an overall sample size for sufficient statistical power but also an adequate sample size for each school to ensure adequate representation of that school—that is, one can assume that the sample reflects the student population at a specific school. Meeting these two demands in the "real world" of school-based research is a significant challenge. Engaging school teachers and administrators into the student recruitment process is critical. Schoeppe, Oliver, Badland, Burke, and Duncan (2014) state that successful recruitment and retention strategies should focus on building trustful relationships with school partners, parents, and children; having project champions at the school(s); and working with the school partners to optimize consent and follow-up procedures.

Too often, school partners and stakeholders are not invited to recruitment and retention planning meetings until problems arise. This is a mistake. School staff should be engaged as early as possible. Teachers and administrators can prevent many problems by creatively meshing school operations with research protocols. Researchers should foster ownership of the research program within the school, resulting in the school staff becoming advocates of the program to students, families, and the community. Although an academic institution may promote evidenced-based practice and cutting-edge programs, it is the schools that are valued and trusted by families in local communities. Therefore, the school's support and promotion of the research program to the students and their families is critical.

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To ensure success, school partners should be actively involved in the development of recruitment plans from the initial planning phases. For example, school leaders and students can provide input on how best to present the study to the student body or potential participants. Creative ideas for recruitment plans generated from students have included attending sporting events, lunch periods, and parent open houses and using text messaging services that are commonly used for emergency school closings.

School staff and stakeholders should work closely with academic researchers to tailor all recruitment materials sent home to families, including information packets, compensation for time and effort, and language on assent/consent forms. The academic institution's human subjects committee will have useful guidelines on conducting research with minors in the school. Additionally, each school district may have a local research review board that must approve the school's involvement. School staff and stakeholders are essential for navigating these local approval processes.

School staff are uniquely qualified to understand the various perspectives of the local community. School leaders may communicate support for projects through school newsletters sent to parents and families, letters of support sent home with project information packets, and being present during recruitment sessions at the schools. For example, principals and teachers should attend recruitment assemblies or recruitment sessions and briefly speak to attendees to explain the project and why the school is partnering with the research team. Their leadership is invaluable for explaining the school's participation in the research program to students and families, identifying valued compensation