



SAMPLE MATERIAL: Communication With Families About Experimental Design

Purpose:

Using an experimental design to evaluate a magnet program often requires specialized communication to inform and reassure families. These efforts can prevent misunderstandings and enlist families' support for the evaluation process.

Note: This sample letter to families explains in non-technical language that, for purposes of evaluation, students will be randomly assigned to one of two programs at the magnet middle school. It reassures families that every student will receive a high-quality education, and asks permission for their child to participate in additional voluntary testing. A sample permission form is attached.

Source:

Excerpted from a comprehensive online evaluation guide, produced by St. Paul Public Schools district staff, in collaboration with an external evaluator, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).



Washington Letterhead, then McREL

December 17, 2008

Dear Families of Washington Middle School students:

As you probably know, Washington Middle School received a major federal grant last year and is now a BioSMART school, focusing on Science, Math, Academic Rigor, and Technology. As a part of this grant, Washington Middle School is working with a company called McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) to learn about the BioSMART Project.

BioSMART is based on a national curriculum linking rigorous coursework with career pathways and post-secondary education. Key components of the BioSMART Project are teachers (including post-secondary staff) who are highly trained in science and mathematics, concurrent enrollment in post-secondary schools, high-quality teacher professional development, and strong partnerships with post-secondary institutions and healthcare industries and hospitals.

Research and evaluation are considered an integral part of the federal magnet grants. As part of the research and evaluation for the BioSMART program, we want to clarify two things. First, consistent with the BioSMART approach, all students at Washington Middle School will participate in business partnerships, mentoring, field experience, rigorous math and science courses, cutting-edge educational technology, and Project Lead the Way. Further, similar to previous years, all teachers will be participating in academic professional learning communities (PLCs), which serve as a way for teachers to share ideas for improving instruction. Some teachers will also participate in an "interdisciplinary" PLC, which will attempt to build connections across the separate subjects of science, mathematics, history, English, and health. In order to learn more about interdisciplinary instruction, incoming 7th grade students will be randomly assigned to either the interdisciplinary team or the departmental team. Students will still take the same classes in science, mathematics, and other subjects – the only thing that will be different is in the interdisciplinary team. Teachers on the team who teach different subject areas will be developing some of their lessons together. If you have more questions about this, please contact Principal Mike McCollor at xxx-xxxx.

Second, we will be collecting information from your child. For the most part, the data that we will collect are part of the everyday practices of the school. However, we will also be asking your child to complete the Stanford Achievement Test, 10th Edition (SAT10) in Science (which takes most students 30-40 minutes to complete) and a short survey regarding their engagement and motivation in science-related areas and their interest in pursuing science-related careers (about 15 to 20 minutes).

With your permission, your child will participate in testing and fill out the survey at the start and end of this school year and at the start and end of the next school year. No personal information will be on the surveys, and the tests and surveys will be kept secure in the same way as all of the other tests your child takes. Your child's responses will be used only for statistical purposes. The reports we prepare for this study will not identify your child in any way. We will not provide information that identifies you, your child, or your district to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law.

Your child's participation is voluntary. If you do *not* wish your child to fill out the test or short survey on the BioSMART project, please fill out the form below. If you wish to change your mind and withdraw your permission at any time, you may.

If you have any questions about McREL's study or your child's part in it, please contact me at xxx-xxxx. You may also call Sheila Arens, BioSMART Evaluation Director at McREL, at (xxx)xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Principal Mike McCollor

PARENT OPT-OUT FORM for BIOSMART EVALUATION

If you DO NOT wish to give permission for your child to participate, please:

- 1) Write your child's school name, teacher name, and his or her name in the blanks below.***
- 2) Check ("X") in the box under it.***
- 3) Sign your name and write the date.***
- 4) Return this form to your child's teacher by <date>.***

School Name: _____

Teacher Name: _____

Child's name: _____

My child does NOT have my permission to participate in McREL's study of the BIO•SMART project.

Parent's Signature: _____

Date: _____