

## UChicago Consortium on School Research

### Policy on Neutrality<sup>1</sup>

Adopted January 31, 2017

The UChicago Consortium on School Research investigates the progress and challenges of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), identifies how programs and policies are working, and illuminates what matters most for school and student success. To carry out this work, the Consortium collaborates closely with CPS and other organizations, asking policymakers and practitioners to help shape the research, so that it is relevant to problems of practice. To maintain neutrality while carrying out research in collaboration with CPS or other partners, the Consortium relies on internal and external oversight and transparency of results.

The Consortium strives to observe the highest scholarly, scientific, and professional standards in the collection, analysis, interpretation of data, and reporting of research. Consortium researchers are expected to behave with integrity and honesty and arrive at their conclusions based on the standards of social science evidence.

While the Consortium promotes the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, it does not argue for particular policies or programs. Instead, during the conduct of their studies, researchers meet with policymakers to provide an opportunity for policymakers to reflect on the implications of the findings for their work, and to provide insight to researchers about ways to release findings that would be useful to policy and practice. As studies reach completion and before results are publicly released, Consortium researchers employ a “no surprises” policy by sharing findings with CPS leaders and other stakeholders. To promote transparency, all studies are made public. No outside organization, including CPS or other partner organizations, receives access to findings that are not also released publicly. In this way, findings cannot be selectively released by the district or others. Findings are released as soon as they are completed and the “no surprises” notification has occurred.

To uphold scholarly standards, the Consortium conducts internal reviews at each stage of a study, and its multi-partisan Steering Committee provides external feedback. Composed of representatives of the school system, the teachers’ union, the principals’ association, the Illinois State Board of Education, school-support and advocacy organizations, charter school organizations, faculty from several universities, etc., the Steering Committee provides intellectual guidance from diverse perspectives to Consortium research projects. The Committee approves the Consortium’s research agenda and reviews preliminary findings and penultimate drafts of each study. For some studies, there are further external

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<sup>1</sup> This policy statement follows principles and procedures outlined in the American Educational Research Association’s Code of Ethics. See [http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/docs/About\\_AERA/CodeOfEthics\(1\).pdf](http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/docs/About_AERA/CodeOfEthics(1).pdf).

reviews and/or peer reviews when articles are submitted to scholarly and practitioner journals. For studies that may be particularly controversial, or which contain a potential conflict of interest, we seek additional external review. In consultation with the Principal Investigator, the Executive Director of the Consortium appoints *ad hoc* review and advisory panels.

### **Avoidance of Conflicts of Interest**

The Consortium has collaborated with CPS for more than two decades, with CPS providing permission to conduct research and annual administrative data sets under the Data Sharing Agreement between the UChicago Consortium and CPS. Through its representation on the Consortium Steering Committee, CPS provides advice on studies, but, like other members of the Steering Committee, it does not have editorial authority over study findings. Such authority resides with the authors. As a further safeguard of independence, the Consortium does not conduct research that is funded by CPS.

Review by the Consortium's multi-partisan Steering Committee helps to guard against potential bias in study conclusions, whether positive or negative. For studies that are particularly controversial, like the study of school closings, researchers invite external methodological and substantive experts to serve on an *ad hoc* review panel to ensure that findings and conclusions are fair and unbiased.

In some instances the Consortium collaborates with other units within the Urban Education Institute (UEI), including UChicago Impact, UChicago Urban Teacher Education Program, and UChicago Charter School. These collaborations are mutualistic and focused on a problem of practice. Drawing on their expertise, Consortium researchers may serve as consultants on UEI projects, such as helping the Charter School Governing Board interpret its accountability and other data. In a limited number of cases, Consortium researchers may conduct formative evaluations of UEI initiatives, or participate in research and development activities, such as the 5Essentials survey tool or To&Through data tool. Formative evaluations must meet certain criteria:

1. The formative evaluation is mutually beneficial, in that the UEI unit and the Consortium researchers gain insight into a problem of practice. Formative studies also should allow the Consortium to obtain preliminary findings on a question it wants to investigate in a more comprehensive way.
2. There is a Consortium researcher with available time and funding to pay for his/her salary;
3. External reviewers examine findings before they are publicly released.
4. Results are posted on the UEI unit and/or Consortium website.

To avoid potential bias, the Consortium refrains from conducting summative evaluations of UEI initiatives.

Occasionally, the Consortium conducts studies that indirectly reflect on a unit of UEI, such as a study of Chicago charter schools. In such cases, in addition to the internal and Steering Committee reviews, researchers invite external methodological and substantive experts to serve on an *ad hoc* review panel to assure that findings and conclusions are fair and unbiased.

For some studies, the Consortium engages with an outside partner in the conduct of the research. The Consortium only enters into partnership agreements with organizations that share a commitment to neutrality and transparency. For example, the Consortium does not collaborate on a project where the results are determined before the research is conducted, such as promotion of a particular product or program. Before entering a partnership, the Consortium and the other organization agree to conduct the research in a fair and unbiased manner. If the partner is the organization being studied, an additional *ad hoc* review panel is formed to assure neutrality.

Consortium researchers are invited to serve on a variety of advisory committees and governing boards. Such service does not imply the Consortium's endorsement of recommendations and actions taken by the organization. It also is understood that an individual researcher will not engage in a study of the organization's initiatives.

### **Adherence to the Policy on Neutrality**

Each year, Consortium researchers sign a general conflict of interest statement, upholding this policy. In addition, the University of Chicago requires individuals with academic appointments and principal investigators, including those with the Consortium, to disclose any financial interest that may be related to the individual's research. Indeed, all university employees are subject to a conflict of interest policy.

If the Executive Director of the Consortium discovers that a researcher may have violated the Neutrality Policy, he/she will facilitate an investigation, and if needed, take appropriate action.

Anyone with a question about possible conflicts of interest should contact the Director of the Consortium, or, if the concern is about that person, they should contact the Director of the Urban Education Institute. Either leader may consult the University's Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs regarding specific or general issues related to conflicts of interest.