

Obtaining parent consent is the most important, labor-intensive task a school district has to accomplish.

“I think the most important thing is to get the buy-in from the school administration. Now that we can show them results, it’s beginning to make a difference.”

- Placer COE

Why is Parent Consent Important?

Based on current law, CDE has determined that LEAs conducting the CHKS must obtain written permission (or “active”) consent from a parent or guardian before any student can take the survey. This is the most important, labor-intensive task that a school district has to accomplish. It is a task that requires care and attention. It is also the task that provokes most concern at schools. **If you don’t reach your minimum target student participation rate, you will not have valid, useful results.** Low consent rates can result in nonrepresentative samples and incomplete, inaccurate, and biased data. This issue is heightened when comparing the results from two or administration times. If either survey had a poor response rate, you cannot assume that a difference in results between surveys reflects real change in behavior or attitudes among the entire student population. Moreover, you won’t meet survey-related CDE requirements (See p. 12 of CHKS Guidebook, Part I).

The *Guidebook for the California Healthy Kids Survey, Part I: Administration* describes the parent consent process in detail (Tasks 18-20). It outlines how to develop a proper consent form, offers strategies for distributing, obtaining, and monitoring consent, and recommends ways to motivate teachers and school staff. Appendix D contains model consent forms that can be modified and copied onto your own letterhead (Translations are available in Spanish). The Guidebook and model consent forms are available from your CHKS Regional Center (888.841.7536) or online at www.wested.org/hks.

This issue of “What Works” further discusses a multitude of effective parent consent strategies. These are “tried and true” strategies, recommended by California school districts that have recently administered the survey. (Please refer to the end of this document for a complete list of contributors.)

Teachers: The Golden Key



According to districts, the critical factor in securing high return rates is gaining the support of teachers and school administrators. Inevitably, it is the teacher and other school staff who have to take on the primary responsibilities for obtaining consent, tracking which parents have returned the forms and

which have not. Their role in making sure you achieve your targeted response rate is absolutely critical. They are also the survey representatives to parents, the people they turn to for answers to questions. The more support you have from teachers, the higher your response rate will be. Districts suggest:

- **Praise the teachers.** Thank them for their support during administration time. Let them know how important they are to

The most recommended strategy for increasing consent form return rates is to place the consent forms in registration packets.

obtaining quality results, and how important are quality results.

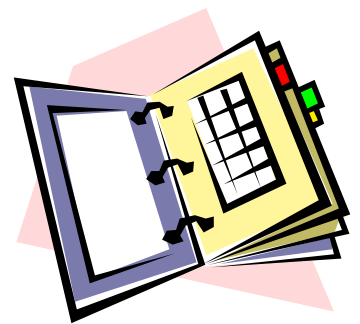
- **Use your most recent CHKS results to foster support.** Share the CHKS results with teachers and school staff. Give school site coordinators the results of the survey, and describe how the data have impacted program decisions and helped to obtain program funding.
- **Communicate well.** Answer questions from school staff in a timely manner. Offer to field parent inquiries or print consent forms for teachers so they don't have to. Talk to superintendents, principals, and teachers during meetings to ask for their support. Send emails periodically to check-in.
- **Develop key contacts.** Have a key contact person at each school site to help define roles and responsibilities, and foster a sense of ownership and pride in administering the CHKS. Site coordinators should help monitor consents and help with problem classes or teachers.
- **Add a personal touch.** Face-to-face interactions are valuable vehicles for fostering support. If possible, meet with each teacher to discuss the importance of the survey. Be available to help explain the survey to students and pass out consent forms.
- **Stress the links between health and academic achievement.** Teachers are very concerned about loss of classroom instruction time. Make sure they are aware of the research that links health, well-being, and low risk behavior to academic achievement. Share with them the results of the analysis of the relationship between CHKS indicators and the state Academic Performance Index, available on the CHKS website.

Most Recommended Strategies

Annual Registration Packets. By far, the most recommended strategy for increasing consent form return rates is to place the consent forms in registration, emergency, or other beginning-of-the year packets and upon registration of new students throughout the year. After registration, provide your teachers with a list of students who have returned consent forms, and supply teachers with extra forms for those students who may still need to obtain consent. Just before the survey, send a flyer home to parents reminding them that the administration of the CHKS is forthcoming and that a sample of the survey is available for viewing.

This strategy may not work as well when not all students in a school are surveyed or when surveys are administered in the spring. If you choose to send the consent forms home closer to the survey administration date, districts suggest still combining them with other forms that require parental signatures and asking for a very short turn around time - only a day or two. This does not mean you can't accept forms after the due date; it simply helps prevent parents from putting the consent forms aside and forgetting them.

High Expectations. From the administration down, the school must establish high expectations for success. Use words like "mandatory" and "responsibility" with teachers, and ask School Coordinators to talk to teachers with low return rates. Make sure students know their teacher won't "let things go."



Incentives for Students

If funds are available, consider using incentives for students who return the consent forms. Task 19 in Part I of the CHKS Guidebook suggests several incentives you might try. In addition, our “What Works” contributors suggest:

- **Let each school develop their own incentive plan.** Tailor the plan to the particular interests of the students in the classroom being surveyed. Use incentive systems that are already in place, if possible.
- **Give students credit.** Extra credit, “homework passes” or other classroom privileges are also effective, especially with high-school students. One district overturned low return rates among PE students by giving a one-time release from running the mile. Another district established two due dates and gave more credit to students that returned the form by the first due date. Students who didn’t get a phone call home from the classroom teacher, encouraging response by the second due date. Letting students know their parents will be called may even be enough!
- **Other individual incentives.** Candy, neon colored key chains, or pencils imprinted with “California Healthy Kids” work well for younger students. One district suggests using candy bars for alternative school students.
- **Offer classroom incentives.** Ice cream or pizza parties can be given to each class that reaches a specified return rate, such as 90%. Larger districts can offer such parties to a few classes with the highest return rates.
- **Enter students in a drawing or raffle.** Students that return consent forms can be entered in a classroom-, school-, or district-level drawing for a prize. This has been found to be especially effective with older students.
- **Accompany incentives with a message.** Convey to students their important role in the survey’s success. Tell them their opinions are valuable and will be used to shape programs in their school.



The Role of Financial Incentives

CHKS staff recently interviewed some of the most successful districts: districts with response rates over 70%.

Financial incentives do work. Using a combination of raffle tickets for students and monetary rewards for teachers tied to the percent of consent forms returned, response rates over 70% have been reported. For example, WestEd achieved a 72% response rate on a statewide survey offering teachers \$75 if 90% of forms were returned. If district funds are not available, you might see if local health agencies interested in valid survey results can help fund them, or turn to businesses to donate goods and services.

You might be surprised to learn, however, that **many of the districts with the highest response rates don’t use incentives that cost money.** The key was engendering a schoolwide commitment to the survey, following the strategies in the Guidebook, and being creative in the use of nonmonetary incentives.

Incentives need to be tied to the number of forms returned regardless of whether permission is granted or not.

“I’d say that giving the teachers incentives works the best. I wouldn’t do it without some type of incentive program.”

- Simi Valley Unified

Research and experience show that almost all parents will approve participation. The challenge is making sure that they receive and return the forms.

Incentives for Teachers

As with students, financial or other types of incentives for teachers may help your district reach target consent form return levels. In fact, several of our contributors suggest that incentives for teachers work better than incentives for students. Any incentive needs to be tied to the number of forms returned regardless of whether permission is granted or not, in order to avoid the appearance that you are pressuring students to participate. Here are some suggestions:

- **Offer incentives based on total consent forms returned.** Pay teachers \$1 per returned consent form. Offer a certificate to a sandwich restaurant to the teacher with the highest number of consent forms returned.
- **Reward teachers who reach a target return rate.** Offer monetary incentives for teachers that obtain a 90% or greater return rate per class, such as a \$50 gift certificate to an educational supply/bookstore. In middle and high schools, whole departments can agree to do the survey, and then can pool their incentive money to buy something to benefit the department.

Working with Parents

Research and experience show that almost all parents will approve participation. The challenge is making sure that they receive and return the forms. The easiest delivery method is to send the forms home with the students, but districts also recommend:

- **Send forms to parents directly.** Try sending forms to parents at home or work via electronic or regular mail.
- **Follow-up by phone.** Ask teachers or school staff to follow-up with parents by phone. One district used a “phone bank” - calling day & night, at home & work, to let them know they could sign the consent forms during an upcoming parent/teacher conference & a scheduled Open House. Involve parent organizations in helping you.
- **Send the forms home using a well-established system of communication.** One district sent all school forms home to parents on the same day (Thursdays). Parents are more likely to receive the forms if they know when to expect them.
- **Make effective use of parent meetings.** Schedule the survey around parent-teacher conferences and ask parents to sign the form during the meeting.



Other challenges may arise from parents concerns about the content of the survey or its interference with classroom instruction time. Address these concerns directly by stressing that the survey is anonymous, confidential, and provides important information about the health of students. A detailed rationale behind the CHKS is available in Appendix B of the CHKS Guidebook (Part I). In addition, our contributors stress the importance of the following:

- **Keep it simple.** Some districts felt the model consent form is too complicated. This form was developed after those required of research surveys by the state Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you want to simplify it, minimally parents must be informed of the content, why their child was selected to take it, and the risks and benefits.
- **Invite the parent to review the survey.** According to CDE guidelines, parents must have the opportunity to review the survey. Districts feel this strategy is particularly valuable as it may help allay parent concerns.

2003-2004 Survey Availability

The 2003-2004 surveys will be available by August 1, 2003. If you need a copy before then, call your CHKS Regional Center. There are several materials we can give you that may suffice until the surveys are ready. For example:

- A copy of the surveys from the previous year.
- A table that outlines past changes to the survey, so parents can get an idea of the types of changes we make.
- A letter from our office including an informal assessment of the changes we anticipate.

- **Attach a letter of support.** Send a note with the consent forms to explain why it is needed and how it will help the school and their child. Show how previous results have impacted your programs in positive ways.
- **Send consent forms in appropriate languages.** Districts with large numbers of non-English speaking parents need to translate the forms in the home language. The CHKS provides model consent forms in Spanish. If you translate them into another language, we would appreciate receiving a copy so that we can make it available to other LEAs.
- **Be sure the consent form is easy to follow.** One district had a problem with parents signing the consent forms, but forgetting to indicate a "yes" or "no" response. They solved this problem by dividing the parent signature area of the consent form into a "yes" and a "no" section, forcing parents to fill out only one side.

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