Too Much of a Good Thing? Working Through Establishment Gatekeepers

Andrew Zukerberg, Andrew Soderborg, Toni Warner, Randy Parmer, Steve Tourkin United States Census Bureau

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Abstract

In the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), school districts (Local Education Agencies, LEAs) function as gatekeepers for the schools within them. An experiment was conducted during the 2003-2004 SASS in three Census Bureau Regional Offices (ROs) to determine the best way to handle district contacts. Approximately half of the school districts in each office were contacted by phone before the survey was conducted to find out what information was needed prior to approving the survey. If information or formal application was required, it was prepared and sent to the district shortly after the call. A standard pre-notice letter was sent to the other half of districts at the start of data collection. This paper reports on the impact that pre-contacting districts has on school response and makes recommendations for handling establishment gatekeepers.

Keywords: Gatekeeper, response rate

Background

The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) is the nation's largest sample survey of K-12 schools. The survey is administered at the individual teacher level through the LEA level utilizing multiple questionnaires. LEAs are critical to conducting SASS in public schools. A refusal at the LEA level can affect multiple questionnaires' response rates. In past SASS administrations, the school district was informed about SASS by mail at the same time the schools were asked to participate. This had the unintended consequence of allowing schools to participate before the LEA refused or schools refusing before the LEA had a chance to support administration of the survey.

The effect of securing LEA approval prior to contacting the school was investigated during the 2003-2004 SASS in order to understand its influence on response rate. Three potential outcomes were anticipated as a result of this change. First, pre-contacted LEAs might approve

increasing response rate. Second, LEAs might have more opportunities to refuse, thus decreasing response rate. Finally, collection time might decrease since securing LEA approval would have already been accomplished by the time schools are contacted.

Methods

Three Census Bureau Regional ROs (Boston, Seattle and Chicago) were selected to participate in this experiment. All of the sampled LEAs in these offices, except those with known processes for survey approval, were assigned to either the test or control group. Table 1 shows the number of LEAs and schools in each of the groups. Trained interviewers who were not told about the nature of the experiment called LEAs in the treatment group to find out if they had any requirements research before а Field Representative (FR) visited their schools. If the LEA had research requirements, they were asked for details about the type of requirements. Then, a package was prepared to meet these requirements. At the end of the call, the LEAs were asked for the name of a contact person to whom the LEA questionnaire should be addressed. The LEAs assigned to the control group were asked only for the name of a contact person for the LEA questionnaire.

Table 1: Unweighted Counts of Schools andLEAs by Group

	LEA n=	School n=	
Control	665	1164	
Treatment	667	1122	

In October 2003, LEAs were sent a letter regarding SASS. Treatment LEAs received a letter informing them that data collection was starting and thanking them for their participation. LEAs in the control group received a letter encouraging their participation.

FRs were told that the LEAs had been notified about SASS, and in cases where the LEAs approved SASS, they were provided with the letter of approval from the LEA. FRs were not told the nature of the research so that the experiment was kept blind.

Data collection began when the FRs called the schools and used a computerized instrument to

administer a series of screening questions to verify that the school was in sample. Then the interviewer identified a contact person at the school and set up an appointment to visit the school. At this appointment, the FR used the instrument to enter a list of all teachers at the school; this constituted the Teacher Listing Form (TLF). At this time, FR's distributed the remaining SASS questionnaires. FR's kept a log of each contact with the school needed to complete the TLF and the School Questionnaire.

The final total weighted response rates for the treatment and control groups were calculated at the end of data collection. The formula used to calculate the weighted response rates was:

 $\frac{\sum interviews * basic weight}{\sum total eligible for interview * basic weight}$. The

variance associated with these response rates was calculated using the following formula:

 $\frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}(r_i-\bar{r})^2$, where r_i is the replicate weighted

response rate. The replicates were formed using a bootstrap variance methodology. Two more estimates were computed for the treatment and control groups, as well as the interviews and noninterviews: the weighted average number of visits and the weighted average time spent with each school. The variances associated with these estimates were calculated using the same basic formula as for the response rate variance with the appropriate averages and replicates used.

Results

Of the 667 LEAs in the treatment group, three refused any contact with the representative during the calling operation and two LEAs could not be contacted. 456 LEAs requested some type of follow up prior to approving SASS in their schools. Of these, 255 requested a formal proposal or detailed overview of the research. 110 requested a brief description of the research. The remaining LEAs indicated that a representative from the Census Bureau need only contact them a few days prior to sending an FR to schools in their LEA. Research proposals were sent to the 255 LEAs that requested them, and a long letter describing SASS was sent to the 110 LEAs that required a brief description. The remaining LEAs received a standard pre-notice letter that thanked them for agreeing to participate in SASS and provided a brief overview of the survey. After receiving the follow up materials, eight LEAs responded to Census with a formal approval. 33 LEAs did not approve SASS and 415 LEAs did not respond.

Table two shows that efforts to pre-contact the LEA had no impact on the final response rate for the LEA Questionnaire.

Table 2: Weighted Response Rate (RR) for LEA Form by Treatment Group

Group	LEA RR (var)	P value
Control	79.3% (.001)	.534
Treatment	76.1% (.001)	

Table three shows that the type of information requested by the LEA did not impact its response rate to the LEA questionnaire. So providing more information to the LEA did not improve the likelihood that they would respond to the LEA Questionnaire.

Table 3: Comparison of Weighted RR by LEAResearch Request

Request	LEA RR (var)	P value
Proposal (1)	69.7% (.003)	1 vs. 2 .182
Full Letter (2)	81.6% (.004)	1 vs. 3 .400
Pre-notice (3)	78.2% (.006)	1 vs. 4 .240
No Follow up	75.8% (.002)	2 vs. 3 .739
Required (4)		2 vs. 4 .699
- · ·		3 vs. 4 .966

Table four shows that some response rate differences emerged within the treatment group. Not surprisingly, LEAs that did not approve schools under them participating in SASS were less likely to complete the LEA questionnaire than either the LEAs that approved it or did not respond. Note that LEAs that did not formally respond were treated as having approved in our follow up materials.

Table 4: Weighted Response Rate (RR) on LEA questionnaire by Outcome of Response to Request for Permission to Conduct SASS at LEA Schools

	LEA RR	P value
	(var)	
Approved	80.2% (.001)	Approved vs.
SASS		Denied <.001
Denied	36.6% (.009)	Denied vs. No
SASS		response <.001
No Response	76.9% (.001)	No Response vs.
		Approved .581

As mentioned before, the response of the two school level forms, the TLF and the subsequent School Questionnaire, were tracked. Table five shows that there was no significant difference between the treatment and control groups on initial response rate.

School Level Forms by Treatment Group			
Group	TLF RR(var)	School	
		RR(var)	
Control	87.2%	81.4%	
	(<.001)	(<.001)	
Treatment	88.6%	80.6%	
	(<.001)	(<.001)	
P value	.460	.690	

Table 5: Weighted Response Rate (RR) forSchool Level Forms by Treatment Group

Table six shows that the impact of the different types of follow-up (letter, proposal, etc.) on the school level response rate was minimal. Schools that were part of LEAs that requested a full proposal tended to have lower response rates than all of the groups. This difference was significant for both school forms when compared to the 'no follow up required' group.

Table 6: Weighted Response Rate (RR) based on Research Requirement from LEA for TLF and School Questionnaires

Follow	TLF	Р	School	Р
up type	RR(var)	value	RR(var)	value
Proposal	86.9%	1vs.2	78.5%	1vs.2
(1)	(<.001)	.745	(<.001)	.939
Full	85.1%	1vs.3	78.1%	1vs.3
Letter (2)	(.002)	.694	(.003)	.713
Pre-	88.2%	1vs.4	80.2%	1vs.4
notice	(<.001)	.002	(.001)	.020
(3)		2vs.3		2vs.3
None	94.6%	.584	86.4%	.749
Required	(<.001)	2vs.4	(<.001)	2vs.4
(4)		.072		.167
		3vs.4		3vs.4
		.027		.160

Table seven shows that within the treatment group, the response from the LEA had minimal impact on the school's decision to respond. In fact, the only significant difference in response occurred on the TLF form when comparing schools in LEAs that approved SASS with schools in LEAs that did not respond to the follow up materials.

Table 7: Weighted Response Rate (RR) Compared With Outcome of LEA Pre-contact for Treatment Cases on the TLF and School Ouestionnaire

Questionnant				
Outcome	TLF	Р	School	Р
	RR(var)	value	RR(var)	value
Approved	94.5%	1vs.2	86.2%	1vs.2
(1)	(<.001)	.206	(<.001)	.664
Denied (2)	89.1%	1vs.3	83.2%	1vs.3
	(.001)	<.001	(.004)	.009
No	86.5%	2vs.3	78.3%	2vs.3
Response(3)	(<.001)	.976	(<.001)	.956

Interestingly, the LEA's decision to complete the LEA Questionnaire seemed to have a greater impact on the school's response rate. Table eight shows the response rate for the School Questionnaire by LEA response to the LEA Questionnaire.

Table 8: Weighted Response Rate (RR) ofSchools by LEA Response to LEA Questionnaire

Status	of	LEA	School	P value
Form			RR(var)	
Comple	eted		84.1% (<.001)	<.001
Refused	1		71.2% (<.001)	

Discussion

Results of the study indicate that additional contacts had no impact on the overall response rates of schools or LEAs. At the same time, precontacting the LEAs and providing the additional information they requested required significant resources in time and money. A number of factors may explain this. During the call to the LEA, the telephone interviewer asked to speak with someone who was knowledgeable about the LEA's research policies. It is possible that they did not reach a decision maker. This is supported by the fact that some LEAs that refused on the telephone completed the SASS questionnaire when it was mailed to the LEA office. Additionally, in many of the LEAs that reported having formal research requirements, the request had to be approved by a committee rather than an individual.

There were indications that schools function somewhat autonomously from their LEAs in making the decision to participate in surveys. This was supported by the fact that 49 schools in LEAs that denied our request to participate in SASS completed the questionnaire and 415 schools completed SASS in LEAs that refused the LEA questionnaire. Previously, the requirements for LEA approval were often given over the telephone and may have been a delaying tactic of the school level gatekeeper. However, when the interviewer was present at the school, this reason was perhaps no longer viable. Out of the entire SASS survey (across all ROs) only 60 TLF cases were coded out as an LEA refusal. Of these, just 33 occurred in ROs that were not part of the experiment. Only 18 of the LEA refusals came from the three regions involved in the study. This would seem to indicate that a school level gatekeeper exerts more influence on the decision to participate than the school's LEA.