

MEMORANDUM

To: Ed Condon, River Forest Public Schools, District 90
From: Karen Grigorian, Erin Knepler, and Jenny Seelig, NORC
Date: December 18, 2023
Subject: River Forest Public School District 90 Focus Group Research Proposal

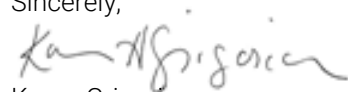
Dear Dr. Condon,

Thank you for the opportunity to revise and resubmit a proposal in response to our conversation on December 14, 2023. This memo provides you with NORC's work scope and a revised cost estimate to conduct teacher focus groups, analyze the data, and prepare a report for the spring 2024 term. For the purposes of scheduling, we assume this project will begin in winter/spring 2024 or at the start of the 2024/2025 academic year. The project period will be approximately four months.

Please note this initial work scope and cost estimate include data that shall not be disclosed outside of River Forest Public Schools, District 90 and shall not be duplicated, used, or disclosed – in whole or in part – for any purpose other than to evaluate this initial proposal. If, however, a contract is awarded to NORC as a result of – or in connection with the information in this memo, River Forest Public Schools, District 90 shall have the right to duplicate, use, or disclose the data to the extent provided in the resulting contract.

After you have had the time to review our proposed work scope and cost estimates, we look forward to receiving your feedback and refining our proposal to any further specifications you may have. In the meanwhile, if you would like us to clarify anything further, please do not hesitate to reach out. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to present our approach to you and your colleagues.

Sincerely,



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River Forest Public Schools District 90 Teacher Focus Group Research Work Scope by Major Task and Cost Estimate

To support the research needs of River Forest Public School District 90, NORC proposes to conduct key stakeholder interviews, conduct teacher focus groups, analyze data, and prepare a findings report and executive summary for River Forest Public School District 90.

Introduction and Context

Relationship between School Leaders and Teacher Wellbeing. Schools are internally complex organizations responding to pressures from multiple, external stakeholders and evolving policy environments (Diehl & Golann 2023). Demands on school leaders are increasing with pressures from accountability policies, expansion of school choice, and a heightened focus on equity and cultural responsiveness (Grissom et al., 2021). Although managing the adult culture in the school is both expected of and valued in school leaders (Grissom et al., 2021), the demands of instructional improvement and accountability pervade many aspects of school leaders' roles. Furthermore, the inherent complexities of school leadership can influence whether school leaders experience the demands of improving student outcomes (e.g., developing teachers with students' standardized test scores front of mind) as competing with teachers' organizational or emotional needs (e.g., time spent on staff wellness or culture building; Blaushild & Seelig, in press).

Studies investigating school working conditions emphasize the importance of principal leadership and the need for principals to create strong school environments conducive to student learning (Johnson et al., 2012). School leaders "broker" or cultivate teachers' working conditions by setting the tone for the school's organizational culture and climate, creating teachers' schedules, forming grade-level and content teams, providing learning opportunities for teachers, and fostering trust and social capital between staff members (Brown & Wynn, 2009). High-quality principals create a positive school culture by granting teachers professional autonomy, encouraging teachers to try new strategies, getting to know their staff, inviting teachers to share their expertise and ideas, and engaging in explicit and purposeful communication with staff (Hollingworth et al., 2018). In schools with low rates of teacher turnover, school leaders support new teachers in their professional development, involve teachers in decision-making, acknowledge teacher expertise, expand teacher leadership capacity, adopt an "open-door" policy, and create professional communities to reduce teachers' feelings of isolation and to improve satisfaction and morale (Scallon et al., 2021).

River Forest Public School District 90 Context. River Forest Public School District 90 operates three schools – two elementary, Lincoln (K-4) and Willard (K-4), and one middle school, Roosevelt (5-8). Both elementary schools recently received Exemplary Designations from the Illinois State Board of Education and Roosevelt Middle School received a Commendable Designation on the 2023 Illinois Report Card (River Forest Public Schools, 2023). District 90 educates 1,363 students, 35.5% of whom are students of color and 3.7% are English Language Learners. Overall, 3.7% of students are classified as low-income and 12% of students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Of students who took the state standardized tests, 66% are proficient in English Language Arts, 59% are proficient in Mathematics, and 79% are proficient in Science. According to the 2023 District Report Card, class sizes in the district have remained at 20 students over the last three years, with a 16:1 ratio of elementary students to teachers. District 90 employs 114.5 full-time equivalent teachers where over 90% identify as white and 81% identifying as female. Eighty

percent of teachers in the district have a master's degree and only 4% of teachers are considered novice (i.e., within their first two years of teaching). Despite a three-year decrease in teacher retention rates, the district has a current rate of 91%. There are 9 administrators in the district, all of whom identify as white, 5 of whom are female and 4 of whom are male. All three principals have been in their positions in the district for more than seven years.

Illinois 5Essentials Survey and Results. The Illinois 5Essentials Survey is designed and annually administered by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research across all public school districts in the state. Teachers and students take the survey, with an additional and supplemental survey available for parents of children in the district. The 5Essentials survey collects information and analyzes responses along five core components relevant for school success: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment, and ambitious instruction (UChicago Impact, 2023). Results are reported by individual school in each district and the information is publicly available on the Illinois School Report Card.

In River Forest School District 90, recent 5Essentials survey results indicate potential areas of discontent/disconnect/conflict between teachers and school leaders, particularly in the area of instructional leadership. The survey defines instructional leadership as “the school leadership team sets high standards for teaching and student learning” and is reported on by teachers according to certain metrics. Each school appears to have experienced challenges related to instructional leadership over the last three cycles of the survey (2021, 2022, 2023), which is inclusive of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While instructional leadership is an essential component of school climate, research points to other dimensions of the school leader and teacher relationship as important for teacher retention and morale (Blaushild & Seelig, in press; Brown & Wynn, 2009). These other dimensions are also highlighted in the survey, including teacher-principal trust, teacher influence, and program coherence. In these areas, the three schools show some variation. For example, at Lincoln Elementary, the teachers report a strong level of teacher-principal trust, while at Roosevelt Middle School, teacher influence is neutral, and at Willard Elementary program coherence is neutral. These differences illustrate that a combination of environmental factors in each school as well as specific dimensions of school climate and adult culture are potentially influencing the overall perception of instructional leadership in each of the schools.

Project Summary

Project Coordination. NORC is a full-service research organization with a commitment to customer-centric project management. The River Forest Public School District 90 Teacher Focus Groups Research project will have a dedicated project director and team who bring content and methodology knowledge and virtual focus group data collection experience.

Principal Investigator (PI), Jenny Seelig, PhD, Senior Research Scientist, evaluates educator pathways and teacher diversification initiatives and provides expertise on educational ecosystems. With over a decade of research experience, Dr. Seelig works regularly with state and local partners to develop qualitative and mixed methods studies that evaluate a variety of educator pipeline programs. In a forthcoming publication in the *American Journal of Education*, Dr. Seelig and her co-author examine how school principals in urban, suburban, rural, and charter public schools understand their role in creating a supportive adult culture and attend to teacher

wellbeing. This study influences Dr. Seelig's emphasis on teacher-school leader relationships as central to teacher retention and student academic achievement. As a former high school teacher, she uplifts teacher perspectives and brings an asset-based approach to all her research.

Methodologist, Lisa Davidson, PhD, Senior Research Scientist, brings more than 20 years of experience in diverse higher education settings, including institutional research and assessment contexts. With a demonstrated commitment to research, assessment, and evaluation practices that advance inclusion and equity, Dr. Davidson's expertise involves cross-cultural considerations in measuring learning, development, and engagement. She is experienced in the design and administration of institutional climate assessments, large-scale survey efforts, and analyzing and translating multi-institution assessment and research findings into actionable information for schools and colleges. Dr. Davidson will be supported by a team of experienced research associates who will assist with institutional coordination, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

To ensure this complex project is managed effectively across tasks, Erin Knepler, PhD, Senior Research Director, will assume the critical role of Project Director (PD). Dr. Knepler has successfully directed much of NORC's suite of institutional climate studies since 2019 and will monitor the overall project schedule and budget and facilitate coordination across the NORC team.

Project Communication. Key stakeholders from River Forest Public Schools and NORC will work closely together throughout the project. Work will commence with a virtual kickoff meeting with River Forest Public Schools leadership, other key stakeholders, and the NORC team. During this initial meeting, River Forest Public Schools will have the opportunity to clarify the goals and details of the project, and NORC will be prepared to review the project schedule. Jointly, the team will establish the optimal channels for communication and plans for future meetings. Another important goal of this initial meeting will be for NORC to understand which topics and focus areas are most important to learn more about and River Forest Public Schools-specific programs, policies, or procedures that need to be referenced during the focus groups.

After this meeting, NORC will immediately begin to schedule three to five key stakeholder interviews. These interviews will be used to gather context and to inform the development of the focus group protocol. NORC will schedule check-in meetings throughout the life of the contract as needed. During data collection, NORC will provide updates as available.

Data Security. River Forest Public Schools' data will be protected by world-class data security standards. For all NORC projects, we leverage our certified, firewalled computing environment, team of security experts, and extensive government contract experience to meet or exceed federal requirements and data security standards. Moreover, NORC uses highly secure internal network storage to prevent data loss, corruption, and unauthorized breach and administer least-privilege, password-protected access rights, thus safeguarding personally identifiable information (PII) and individual privacy. All authorized system users are assigned a unique user identification number and password and are timed out of sessions if they are logged in and then inactive for a set period. This means that within NORC's system, we will create a separate account area for the River Forest Public Schools report development, which will only be accessed by the NORC staff involved in data analysis and drafting the report, and all those NORC staff are uniquely identified within the system.

All NORC system environments meet or exceed the Federal Information Security Management Act, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, and National Institute of Standards and

Technology (NIST) 800-53 Rev.4 framework compliance standards.

Institutional Review Board. Prior to the start of stakeholder interviews and the first focus group, NORC will complete an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application and submit it to NORC's IRB. We recommend NORC be the IRB of record for this project. NORC's IRB Administrator and Chair are responsive to the need for timely reviews, and all Board members take an active role in helping guide protocols to meet the highest standards for human subject protections. NORC anticipates receiving IRB approval within two weeks. IRB fees are included in the budget.

Key Stakeholder Interviews. In consultation with River Forest Public School District 90 leadership, NORC will identify a list of key stakeholders to conduct three to five 1-hour long in-depth virtual interviews. The NORC team will prepare all materials needed to conduct the virtual interviews, including informed consent, and an interview guide for submission to our Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval in advance of data collection. A member of the NORC team will conduct each interview and a notetaker will be present; with participant's consent we will audio record the conversation. The interviews will focus on obtaining deep understanding of perceived issues and additional context used to inform the development of the focus group protocol.

Focus Group Protocol Development. Drawing on the understanding that the leadership practices of educational leaders are often guided and shaped by external community factors, such as geographic location, size, governance structure and demographics (Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009), we hypothesize that such factors influence how districts and teachers develop the teaching curriculum and teach students. We therefore propose conducting focus groups across the three schools in the River Forest School District 90 to better understand how the environmental factors in each school may impact specific dimensions of school climate and potentially influence the overall perception of instructional leadership. The focus protocol development will also be informed by our review of the Illinois 5Essentials survey and data from District 90. This step will allow us to develop a more robust and meaningful protocol that builds from existing survey findings. Additionally, we will draw on information gathered during the key stakeholder interviews to develop the focus group protocol.

Focus Groups. Upon IRB approval, NORC will conduct six to nine virtual focus groups¹. NORC recommends three focus groups at each District 90 school (i.e., Lincoln, Willard, and Roosevelt). Additionally, when possible, we seek to have maximum variation across focus group participants (i.e., novice, mid-career, and veteran teachers; subject, grade, gender, and race/ethnicity). Ideally, each focus group will include five to six teachers. This strategy will allow us to reach more than one-third of the teaching staff across the three District 90 schools.

The NORC team can coordinate the recruitment of focus group participants with an appropriate school point of contact (POC). NORC's direct involvement with recruitment helps to ensure participant confidentiality (i.e., institutional points of contact do not collect or send individual employee names) and efficiency (i.e., NORC can identify focus group dates, times, and participants; schedule; and send pre-meeting materials to participants all at once). To execute this, NORC will provide each school POC with a focus group marketing toolkit, which includes an email template with an online recruitment form link to share with prospective participants. This online recruitment form will 1) ask prospective participants to provide their availability to participate in a focus group and 2) collect information about any demographic (or other) characteristics required to execute the institution's preferred focus group sampling approach.

¹ For budget purposes, we include two price points in Table 2 to allow for a comparison of costs.

After the institutional points of contact have distributed the online recruitment form to prospective participants, NORC will use the responses to schedule each focus group.

NORC will send prospective participants a focus group invitation email with the informed consent form and a link to a Zoom registration form to register for the session. The Zoom registration form collects information from participants: their name, and email address. The NORC team proposes to develop and include optional demographic questions on this registration form. Responses to these questions can be used to enhance focus group data analyses by allowing the NORC team to analytically consider additional participant characteristics. Upon completing the Zoom registration form, participants will be sent a Zoom meeting link to join their focus group session.

We will conduct focus groups using semi-structured protocols, enabling analysis across interviewees and districts, but allowing for enough flexibility to capture individual aspects of each school and individual's story. We will also ask questions specifically about the district's internal resources and community-based resources and questions about state and district governance. The focus groups will be recorded and transcribed.

Analysis and Reporting. Using recorded and transcribed focus group data, NORC will approach data analysis by employing content analysis to identify, categorize, and compare themes within and across the various focus groups. To do this, NORC will develop a code frame to identify concepts (or codes) that emerge from the data. The code frame allows NORC to carefully define, illustrate (i.e., with direct quotes and/or specific examples), and precisely tally the various codes in the data. Analyzing these detailed codes enables NORC to identify key themes and compare these themes within and across focus groups. After focus group data analyses conclude, NORC will employ member checking, a verification process that invites all focus group participants to review the preliminary focus group findings for accuracy before sharing with institutional stakeholders. This practice helps to validate and enhance the credibility of the focus group findings. In reporting findings, NORC develops reports that are both comprehensive and easily readable to optimize use by the campus community. The report for River Forest Public School District 90 will include a detailed methodology section, comprehensive focus group findings, and an executive summary. In the report, NORC will describe all research and data processing procedures consistent with the guidelines of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative (https://www.aapor.org/Transparency_Initiative.htm). Complying with AAPOR standards provides full transparency of NORC's research methods and allows River Forest Public Schools to replicate this or similar efforts in the future. NORC will summarize the findings, providing detail (e.g., quotes to illustrate themes) while fully protecting the confidentiality of the participants. We will be sure to include an executive summary in the report, which District 90 leadership can use on its website or in other materials.

Project Schedule

Table 1 outlines the work scope and schedule between January 2024 and April 2024. If River Forest Public School District 90 leadership decide to begin this work at the start of the 2024/2025 academic year, we will adjust the schedule accordingly.

Table 1. Schedule Overview by Major Task

Task No.	Task	Task Overview	Start	End
1	Project Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project communication and management Institutional Review Board 	January 2024	April 2024
2	Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct 3-5 key stakeholder interviews to understand the context and help inform protocol development Develop focus group protocol Coordinate with River Forest Public School District 90, and each school’s point of contact about conducting focus groups and focus group logistics Conduct nine teacher focus groups 	January 2024	February 2024
3	Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Code and analyze focus group data Prepare a methods and summary report from focus groups 	February 2024	March 2024
4	Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop institutional report of focus group findings 	March 2024	April 2024

Cost Estimate

Assuming NORC’s proposed work scope is well aligned to the needs of River Forest Public School District 90, the estimated cost is between \$32,134 and \$28,025 depending on the amount of focus groups NORC conducts.

Table 2 provides the estimates by task and assumes a cost-plus-fixed fee price cost structure, but NORC is amenable to different contract vehicles. Further, should River Forest Public School District 90 leadership wish to adjust the work scope or any of the assumptions, NORC is happy to revise this cost estimate accordingly.

Table 2. River Forest Public School District 90 Teacher Focus Groups Cost Estimate by Task

Task	NORC Cost Estimate For 9 Focus Groups	NORC Cost Estimate for 6 Focus Groups
Task 1. Project Coordination	\$2,690	\$2,690
Task 2. Data Collection	\$10,092	\$8,982
Task 3. Data Analysis	\$9,208	\$6,209
Task 4. Methodology, Findings Report, and Reporting	\$10,144	\$10,144
TOTAL for all tasks	\$32,134	\$28,025

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