Moderator: Sharon Burton
March 11, 2008
9:00 AM ET

Sharon Burton: Okay; thank you. My name is Sharon Burton. I'm with the US Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, and I'm here to talk about the Partnerships in Character Education grant competition information and to welcome you to this call. This is part of a series of technical assistance calls to assist you in any questions or concerns that you have regarding the application process.

With me today is Dr. Elizabeth Warner. She is from the Institute for Educational Sciences and she will be also on the call to answer any questions about the evidence-based program evaluation competitive preference priority that's part of this application.

Okay; this is the second in a series of four dial-in calls that will be hosted for the Partnerships in Character Education Program grant competition for fiscal year 2008. The purpose of the dial-in calls is to provide an opportunity for the public and potential applicants to ask questions about the grant competition and procedures to apply that will support a successful submission of an application.

The notice inviting applications for the Partnerships in Character Education program was published in the Federal Register on February 21, 2008. This notice is considered the official document governing this grant competition.

The purpose of the Partnerships in Character Education program is to provide grants to eligible entities to assist them in designing and implementing character education projects that teach students the elements of character such as caring, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, and civic virtue, just to name a few.

Eligible applicants are listed in the Federal Register announcement and the application package. In order to apply for the grant under the program competition this year, an applicant must meet the absolute priority and may apply for the competitive preference priority.

The absolute priority is that we will award grants under this competition to design and implement character education programs that are able to be (1) integrated into classroom instruction and are consistent with state academic content standards; and (2) carried out in conjunction with other education reform efforts, taking into consideration the view of parents; students; students with disabilities, including those with mental or physical disabilities; and other members of the community, including members of private and nonprofit organizations.

The evaluation for projects under the competitive preference priority will utilize an experimental or quasi-experimental design to evaluate program effectiveness. Applications will be reviewed using a two-stage process if you choose to apply for the competitive preference priority. In the first stage, the application will be reviewed without taking the competitive preference priority into account. In the second stage of review, the applications rated highest in Stage 1 will be reviewed for the competitive preference. Under this priority, we will give a total of up to 20 points to an applicant if they are proposing to use an experimental or quasi-experimental design.

The following selection criteria will be used to evaluate applications under this grant competition. The maximum score for all of these criteria is 100 points. (1) Quality of the project design. The maximum points for that criteria is 30 points. (2) Quality of the management plan. The maximum score for that selection criteria is 25 points. (3) Quality of project personnel. The maximum points for that criteria is 15 points. And (4) quality of project evaluation. The maximum points for that criteria is 30 points. It is estimated that a total of two new awards will be made under this competition.

In making awards under this program, we will consider the rank order of applicants and, to the extent practicable, ensure that the awards under this program are equitably distributed among the geographic regions of the United States and among urban, suburban, and rural areas. Contingent upon the availability of funds, additional awards may be made in fiscal year 2009 or 2010 from the rank-ordered list of nonfunded applications from this competition.

We have a transcriber on this call that will be taking notes during this call as well as the remaining calls to capture the questions asked and responses to the questions so that each may be posted on the following websites for review -- the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools website, which is www.Ed.gov/ofdfs/; Character, Education, and Civic Engagement Technical Assistance Center website, which is www.cetac.org; and that's cetac.org. Also posted on these websites is a copy of the Federal Register notice that was dated February 21 announcing the grant competition and providing guidance on how to apply for the grant.

The application package providing information and instructions on how to complete and submit an application for consideration. Please note the closing date for this application is March 31st. The list of dates and times for the remaining dial-in conference calls.

I do want to also note that for those of you that are looking to apply under the competitive preference priority, that there are some resources available. One I do want to highlight is the "Mobilizing for Evidence-Based Character Education" publication that was developed in the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools in conjunction with evaluators in the field that can be a useful resource if you're looking to develop an experimental or quasi-experimental program evaluation for your character education proposal. The guide does cover partnering with an evaluator, developing a comprehensive program, and preparing the evaluation plan. And that document can be found on those two websites that I've mentioned and can be downloaded.

Okay. At this time, I would like to actually ask Dr. Warner if she has any comments or anything she'd like to share regarding the competitive preference priority before we open up the call.

Elizabeth Warner: Okay, sure. Maybe what would be useful is for me to talk a little bit about what would be expected, or what might reviewers be looking for, when they're assigning the competitive priority points. A few suggestions. Basically, you're going to want to be very clear about what sort of questions the evaluation is going to address so that then a review could look

and see, well, does the design that you're proposing-- is it consistent with the question that you're trying to address?

And that you want to be really clear about exactly what kind of a design you're using, whether it's a random assignment study where you're having the treatment, the character ed program, being assigned by lottery to either people who receive the program versus those who don't, and then you're going to collect data on both groups and do comparisons of those?

Or is it a quasi-experimental design where you're going to have the character ed program being administered in one place, or for one group; and then, prior to starting the character ed program, you've selected an alternative group that is similar to the one that's going to receive the character ed program and then you're going to do analyses to compare those types of groups.

There are other kinds of designs, but basically you're going to want to make sure that you're very clear about what sort of research design that you're going to be using to address the question at hand.

And then, you want to be very clear about what sort of data collection is going to be used in the evaluation design. And in particular, I would think that data collection that's consistent with the field, those that might already exist, would be preferable to those that are designed off the cuff. Although what you need to make sure is also that whatever data collection you have is consistent with the program goals that are part of your character ed selected program.

And then finally, it seems important to be very clear about either what criteria you're going to be using with the evaluator that's going to conduct the evaluation if you are going to do that after the award of the grant. Or if you have an evaluator that you are proposing, you'd want to be very clear about what are their qualifications so that that would also be part of a strong evaluation design.

And I think that's probably about the major things that you want to make sure that you make very clear in your evaluation component.

Sharon Burton: Thank you, Dr. Warner, for that information. We'll now open the call for questions or comments regarding the application and the competition.

Operator: If you have a question at this time, please press the 1 key on your touch-tone telephone. Our first question comes from Mr. ---.

Caller: Hi, Sharon. I think Dr. Warner may have just answered this, but the first question I had was whether or not the evaluator or evaluators, evaluation team, could or should be listed in the proposal, with credentials, or if it would be better not to do that and send that out to bid afterwards.

Sharon Burton: Thank you for that question. If you look in your application packet on page 14 and 15, there is specific information and guidance regarding the identification of any contractor for this grant program. Our recommendation is to follow that guidance.

That guidance does indicate that competitive bids must be done on-- whatever procedures that are outlined by your district or state to identify a contractor must be followed before hiring that person or identifying that person in the grant application.

What many grantees have done in the past is provide a thorough description of the type of evaluator that they would like to have for the competition -- for their proposal -- to actually carry out the functions of the evaluation design and the kinds of experience and knowledge that that person or persons would have.

So I would suggest that you take a look at that information. It does even give some thresholds as far as, for example, the amount of funding that the evaluation contract may have as far as what your options are for contracting those services. Next question?

Operator: Our next question comes from Ms. ---. Ma'am, your line is open.

Caller: Hello. My question is regarding the inclusion of an institute-- institution of higher education. Is that a requirement or is that just one of the acceptable partners if you are applying as an LEA or consortium of LEAs?

Sharon Burton: Thank you for that question. That is not a requirement. We do encourage local education agencies and state education agencies, to partner with a variety of different organizations, and that does include an institution of higher education. So the latter is correct. Next question?

Operator: Our next question comes from Ms. ---. Your line is open.

Caller: Good morning. My question is just-- I'm just trying to get some clarification. You mentioned a document that was available on the Office of Save and Drug-Free Schools web page that gave information about experimental and quasi-experimental design, but I didn't catch the name of that report.

Sharon Burton: What we were referring in the call -- I was referring to a new document that was published by the US Department of Education, and it's entitled "Mobilizing for Evidence-Based Character Education." And that not only provides some good information on helping you to design your evaluation plan, but even if you have an existing character education program and you want to add more rigor or to get some more scientifically based outcomes, it's a wonderful document. And it can be found on the US Department of Education's website as well as our technical assistance website, which is www.cetac.org -- cetac.

Operator: Our next question comes from Ms. ---. Ma'am, your line is open.

Caller: Thank you. My question is, would it be appropriate to put examples of surveys or instruments that we would use during our evaluation in an appendices?

Sharon Burton: Yes. That's always appropriate and it's going to be very helpful, particularly for those-- if you choose to go the competitive preference priority, that will be very helpful for the reviewers to look at if they have any questions or concerns about your design and the information-- how you're going to collect your data.

Operator: Again, if you have a question at this time, please press the 1 key on your touch-tone telephone. Our next question comes from Mr. ---. Your line is open.

Caller: Can the PI and evaluator be one and the same person?

Elizabeth Warner: Did you want me to answer that, Sharon?

Sharon Burton: Yeah, you can answer that and I'll also follow up. Go ahead.

Elizabeth Warner:	Usually, you think of an independent evaluation as being somebody who's separate from the person who administers the program. So that's usually a preferable way to go.
Sharon Burton:	The principal investigator is always the lead investigator on the project; or is the project director. And what Dr. Warner mentioned is correct. So that's something to keep in mind as you put together your proposal. Thank you.
	Yes. I've been given additional information. The evaluator should be independent from the project director and preferably independent from the local education agency, state education agency. They should not-- if they are truly independent, they should not be connected with those agencies, if possible. Next question?
Operator:	Our next question comes from Ms. ---. Ma'am, your line is open.
Caller:	Thank you so much. I actually have two questions, and you may have answered this in the application and I've missed it. Is there a preference for random assignment study over quasi-experimental?
	And my other question is how many applications do you anticipate receiving?
Sharon Burton:	Okay. Your first question -- if you look at the competitive preference priority, if you choose to apply to that, it does outline in detail all of the different kinds of-- well, of course, random is the one that is outlined as far as experimental design, and also the different kinds of quasi-experimental design.
	The highest points can be-- is applied to those that are proposed in random assignment evaluation methods as written as the competitive preference priority. However, there is not a preference one way or the other; that's the way the priority reads. And the way that the scoring will be done, the random assignment may receive more points.
	And, again, it's based on the quality of the design. For example, a quasi-experimental design that's well done and well proposed may score higher than a random assignment that is not proposed well. So just sort of keep that in mind as you apply and as you address this competitive preference. And in the application notice, or the application, all of this information is highlighted on page 20 through 23.
Elizabeth Warner:	And I might just sort of add to that, or highlight, that a random assignment design that's stated but not very credible, or doesn't look as though it could be executed very well, really wouldn't seem like a good strategy compared to a well-done quasi-experimental design. So I guess I would say the same thing that Sharon did -- that quality of the design is pretty important, and that's what you want to be able to convey in your proposal.
Sharon Burton:	To answer your second question, at this time we really don't know how many applications we'll receive. Our last competition, which we had awarded 38 applications, we received 227 applications. Since we are awarding up to two applications, that number may vary as far as the number of applicants that are applying. Next question?
Operator:	Our next question comes from Ms. ---. Ma'am, your line is open.
Caller:	Good morning, Sharon. Do you prefer applicants to use an already-established research-based program, or may we develop our own character education curriculum?
Sharon Burton:	If you look at, again, the absolute priority, it does allow for the development and implementation of a character education program. So the way the legislation reads as well, it's something that is up to the local education agency or the state education agency

that's applying as to what would be the best for their population that they're choosing to implement the program with. Next question?

Operator: I'm showing no further questions at this time.

Sharon Burton: Okay. Is there any additional information that you'd like to share with our audience today, Dr. Warner?

Elizabeth Warner: I guess I could talk a little bit about some of the other designs that one can use. Because I failed to mention that there is this technique, regressionative [ph] continuity, that we've been using at the department recently. And that's another quasi-experimental design that one could use that basically tries to compare the outcomes for those who participate in a character ed program versus those who don't.

But the way that you form those groups has to do with having some sort of a ranking system that determines who gets the program versus who doesn't. And that can be used analytically to figure out what the effect of the program is.

And then, there are other designs that aren't as rigorous and don't-- aren't as informative in terms of the impact of the program but could be somewhat helpful in terms of informing whether the program is on the right track or not, or providing suggestive information for program improvement.

And some of those are the single-subject design or various versions of what some people call a proposed design, where you look at what were the outcomes before the program? And then either-- and programs at various points along the line after the program is implemented. And that can sort of give you a sense of whether outcomes might be associated with the program that you're implementing.

So those sometimes can give at least some guidance of whether you're on the right track. So those are other possible designs that one could include in there. Of course, they're not as rigorous as the ones that we've discussed previously.

Sharon Burton: Thank you. I did want to point out one more piece of information and then open the call for any additional questions. I wanted to note that, in addition to the selection criteria and all of the other information that you'll be submitting, to keep in mind that there is what we call a GPRA measure for this program.

And that has changed from previous years for this program, and I do want to highlight that. A little bit about what GPRA is. It stands for Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, and it's designed to address problems identified by Congress regarding lack of performance data. And it's something that we use to improve program efficiency and effectiveness and to report to Congress and ensure that spending decisions and oversight are, indeed, informed by information that is accurate regarding the effectiveness of the performance of the program.

As required by GPRA, the Department of Education has developed a strategic plan that reflects organizational priorities and integrates those with our mission and program authority.

The GPRA measure-- there has been a GPRA measure that has been revised for the Partnerships in Character Education program, and that includes these two areas. (1) The percentage of Character Education projects that use an experimental or quasi-experimental design for their evaluation; and (2) the percentage of character education

projects that use an experimental or quasi-experimental design for their evaluation that are conducted successfully and that yield scientifically valid results.

The GPRA measures are identified for the PCEP grant to help constitute the way in which we will measure the success of this initiative. Consequently, applicants for this grant should give careful consideration to those measures in developing their projects, and particularly to how they will collect and report data for these measures.

So did want to share that information. It is different than in previous years; and in the application packet, you can find this information on page 17.

Okay, are there any other questions? The other thing I do want to add is that any questions that you may have may already be answered in the application packet, and that is found in our Frequently Asked Questions section on page 27.

Okay. If there are no other questions, or if you think of something afterwards, please check those websites I gave you earlier; they will have a transcript of this call in a few days as well as you're welcome to e-mail me at Sharon.Burton@ed.gov. Any other questions before we close?

Okay. Thank you for your participation in this call.