

APPLICANT FEEDBACK - Program Design

2011 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Teach For America, Teach For America-Alabama	Application ID: 11ES123550
Below are the comments from each External Peer Reviewer that read and evaluated the application. While Reviewers did engage in discussion about their evaluations, consensus was not required as part of their review. Therefore, there may be differing views in their feedback on the quality of the proposal.	
COMMENTS: This application has some strong areas such as recruitment, training, support and community outreach. Evidence of student success must be defined more specifically. Local targeted school data needs to be presented for all targeted schools.	
COMMENTS: (+) The applicant has drawn a relationship between low-income and low student achievement, based on data from a variety of sources including the U.S. Department of Education. An assessment of student performance at a state level, comparing students from low income areas to students from more affluent areas, is provided as well as reports from the specific targeted school districts. For example, in a school where 0% of students receive free/reduced lunch less than 2% of 11th graders tested below mastery levels in reading as compared to more than 23% of 11th graders in a school where 96.3% of students receive free/reduced lunch. (-) The applicant has not provided clear evidence as to how engaging AmeriCorps members has resulted in greater improvements to student achievement as compared to other approaches to educational reform or teacher improvements. While a report from the Urban Institute found that TFA corps members were more effective than non-TFA teachers, this is not supported with relevant data. (-) The applicant starts out with a clear description of the problem and presents some general information that supports the proposed project and its potential value to address the problem. It seems clear that the AmeriCorps member will advance their skills, build on their civic commitment and have a valuable experience, but it is not clear that they will, in fact, have an impact on solving the stated problem. The application becomes less detailed as to what specific goals, relating to student achievement, will be met, how those goals will be measured and how an AmeriCorps member is the best positioned for solving the stated problems. It would be helpful to see concrete data based on past success of the Teach for America program as it relates to improved student achievement.	
COMMENTS: (+) State statistics are used to illustrate income related learning disparities in two of the six local communities which will be served by members. Twenty percent of students statewide tested below grade level in 5th grade but in Sumter County, with a 32.9% poverty level, 43% of the students scored	

below grade level. In Marengo High School where 96.3% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch, more than 23% of 11th graders fell below the state-mandated mastery level. (-) The applicant does not provide examples of poverty levels and achievement gaps in the other three counties and one city in which it proposed to place members. (+) The applicant screens potential members for high GPA and SAT scores. In personal interviews, qualities such as perseverance, critical thinking skills, ability to motivate, organize and communicate are determined. (+) People of color are recruited from historically black colleges and universities and target campuses. The applicant recognizes the importance of role models with similar backgrounds to the children they teach. (+) The Urban Institute/CALDER Research Center study found that applicant's Corps members were, on average, more effective than non-members in all areas and provided a positive impact.-The applicant refers to internal gains measures, but does not provide a description or examples of what is measured. (-) Only two Program Directors are assigned to give personal feedback and support to the 62 Members. (-) No description of the internal measurement tool is provided by the applicant.

COMMENTS: The applicant provides evidence that the six Alabama school districts chosen for the project area are at or below the federal poverty guidelines as demonstrated by 100% of the identified schools having more than 87% of students eligible for free or reduced lunches. The applicant makes some references to the academic gap in some of the schools (Sumter County: 2 Junior High Schools and, Marengo High School) but failed to provide evidence that, in addition to existing in an impoverished community, the students in the majority of the target area also suffer from significant academic achievement gaps. The applicant fails to provide data/evidence that these communities/school districts are lacking an adequate number of qualified teachers as a factor in the identified problem. The applicant identifies three causes for the achievement gap then fails to provide evidence to support their belief. In addition, the applicant fails to clearly indicate and/or link these three causes to their solutions and member goals and outcomes.

The area that the applicant does address well is the link between the lack school capacity to help schools overcome extra challenges. The applicant provides, trains and supports highly motivated educators to poverty stricken communities in the targeted area. The applicant has a history of attracting college graduates with a high academic record as evidenced by the prior year programming. The applicant verbalizes an understanding of the importance of recruiting members of a similar background and ethnicity as the communities they are targeting. The applicant has a structured training program around academic issues and culture that will support the member during the service year. TFA has a structured training and support system established to provide members with a good service experience and potential for continued service learning. The applicant has measurable program goals and outcomes tied to student academic scores and other outcome criteria. The applicant discusses internal measures for academic progress but fails to explain the internal measures/benchmarks.

COMMENTS: The applicant offered a good program design, however, with some major weaknesses. For example, the applicant did not present data from all districts to be served. This information would have given reviewers a better indicator of the types of students (challenges) you had to work with. A second major weakness indicated in the proposal is that there are only two Program Directors for 62 members. This applicant could have offered other positions (Coordinator or Assistant Program Director) that would

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ease the burden of supervising so many staff. The applicant did very well in the areas of training staff, identifying problems in the community and community support.