

APPLICANT FEEDBACK - Program Design

2011 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, AmeriCorps LEAP Initiative	Application ID: 11AC124446
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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: Evidence of the identified problem was not sufficient enough to make a compelling case. More data linking the problem with the program and how AmeriCorps members would have an impact is necessary. The application lacked evidence showing the number of contact hours that AmeriCorps members would have with the children. The plan for training AmeriCorps members was extremely thorough, though evidence showing how their impact will be measured was insufficient.

COMMENTS: Applicant presents information (Peth-Pierce, 2001 and Harvard University National Council on the Developing Child Nov. 2007 report) that indicates social/emotional school readiness is critical for a child to be successful educationally. A 2009 Minnesota School Readiness study linked the lack of school readiness to low-income families. However, the applicant does not present any information about a compelling need in the targeted counties.

Multiple approaches to recruitment are offered stating that word-of-mouth is the most powerful tool. A training program is offered which covers many essential topics to meet the compelling need. Quarterly trainings are provided to share best practices, review skills, and cover new topics. Life after AmeriCorps is addressed in several ways throughout a member’s experience. Supervision is provided by the site partner and members receive an orientation to expectations as well as on-going support from program staff. The applicant did not provide information on the kinds of qualifications/skills being sought in potential members. Members learn a solid basis for service and connection in how service will make a difference. They have opportunities to reflect and learn through monthly reflection reports, meetings, service events and by working with a mentor to discuss life after AmeriCorps. Members must also engage in five new civic engagement activities, connecting them to a deeper civic engagement service ethic. Members recruit volunteers to support classroom programming, raise public awareness and recruit more volunteers to support school readiness efforts.

Applicant is addressing 3 areas designed to support social/emotional skills for school readiness: children in need in the pre-school classroom, parents/caregivers and volunteers, with outcome data provided for pre-schoolers and parents with measures being used to show improvement. Measurable outcomes are not provided showing targets are met in recruiting and retaining volunteers and in their impact on the need. The

training plan addresses member development as well as site supervisors, and is comprehensive with topics which are covered. Member activities are directly related to the compelling need of social/emotional school readiness. Volunteers are recruited to support these activities as well as sustainability. Data is presented documenting improved school readiness when comparing performance of children receiving interventions to those who have not received intervention.

COMMENTS: There are several major and minor strengths and a few minor weaknesses identified.

(+) The Applicant provides some details, evidencing a problem, mirroring national statistics of increased poverty with 13 of 25 counties showing only slightly higher than the state poverty rate. (-) Additional stats and info are needed regarding local program sites, youth and families.

(+) Role & Responsibilities: The Applicant demonstrates a sound recruitment, selection, training and supervisory plan with high probability of success.

(+,-) Member Selection: The Applicant references a "long standing" history of successful AmeriCorps program and a balanced system of recruiting and selecting diverse Members. (-) More information needed on Member requirements.

(+) Supervision: The Applicant's training plan is effective and appropriately develops Members. (+) The Applicant describes the Leap Initiative's "wheel invented" to build the capacity.

(+) The Applicant provides well-designed training, program activities around three main areas promoting an ethic of service and civic responsibility while developing members to become connected informed citizens.

(+) The program design is a comprehensive plan, engaging diverse Member corps in solving the identified problem with measurable/proven range of services with Members serving as role models, increasing their own, students, parents and volunteers' knowledge of social-emotional development and resources; engaging volunteers in regional early childhood advocacy and support, building on 25 year Partnerships with SWIF, the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative coalitions, and a Workforce Initiative.

(+) The Applicant's describes, based on evidence, a proven range of activities with Members and Volunteers providing measurable impact on Head Start children and families with measurements established.

(-) Additional information needed on "Second Step" providing details on intensity/hours of services.

(+) The Applicant presents a holistic and comprehensive plan, recruiting a diverse corps of members who will provide measurable/proven range of services to improve learning outcomes for Head Start children and families. (-) A short list of Community Stakeholders is mentioned, but with no details provided. Additional information on partnering sites is needed. (+) A strong, detailed description of past and future, diverse support indicates sustainability.

COMMENTS: (-)The application includes no meaningful data or persuasive evidence that the identified problems exist in the targeted communities. Very vague, general information is provided about the State's median family income and numbers of children living in poverty. No numbers or percentages are provided. The application discusses a statewide survey indicating that 47% of "sampled children" are not proficient in the social-emotional skills needed for kindergarten readiness but this data is not tied to the service area.

(+) The applicant cites plans to use a variety of methods to recruit members, including word-of-mouth and referrals from alumni, current members, site partners, staff and board members. The organization will also send email bulletins to other partner networks and use the national AmeriCorps recruiting website.(+) The

applicant discusses intent to ensure that the final selection process facilitates a balance of age, gender, ability, education, ethnic and race to contribute to a diverse team of members.(+) Evidence of a thorough orientation process is discussed. Members attend a 30-hour retreat where they receive the AmeriCorps handbook and information on topics such as data collection, academic standards and project planning. (-) The applicant does not adequately discuss selection.

(+) The application indicates that continued engagement in active civic participation will be reinforced through structured opportunities that include Full Corps meetings and service events that reconnect the team to the larger mission and overall participation in the statewide and national service movement. (+) Members confer with mentors to discuss “life after AmeriCorps.” To connect members to a deeper civic engagement service ethic, members are asked to commit to engaging in five new civic engagements activities, such as planning other service projects with community groups or participating in community board meetings.(+) The applicant makes the case that, with their unique perspective and training, members supplement paraprofessional and teaching staff by providing targeted interventions that explore emotion regulation or social skill weakness. Through these encounters with the children, members build developmental assets for social-emotional competence. (+) Members will concentrate on creating a rich language and reading environment, design activities that develop targeted social skills and increase each child's ability for expressing and regulating emotion.

(-) The application does not adequately describe the gains in standardized social-emotional school readiness proficiencies expected as a result of the activities. (+/-) Because the application does not include an adequate discussion regarding need, it is difficult to describe the link between problems (inadequately) identified and solutions. For example, the application states that there are 53,000 children ages 0-4 in the service area and of those children, it is estimated that more than 25,000 will experience social-emotional deficits when they reach kindergarten. The application cites no source for this information or discussion related to how this number was derived.