

APPLICANT FEEDBACK - Program Design

2011 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: United Way of East Central Iowa, Every Child Succeeds AmeriCorps	Application ID: 11AC123561
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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: The applicant presents a convincing case that achievement gaps, especially in early literacy skills and reading proficiency, contribute to rising high school drop-out rates. Relevant reports (Skills 2010 Technology Corridor Report, ChildTrends Report, 2009, and Iowa Department of Education: Basic Educational Data Survey, Address and Enrollment files, 2009) are quoted to correlate low income homes to early learning disparities and the widening of the academic gap as these children grow older. The applicant describes four evidence-based strategies to meet the community needs (Play & Learn of East Central Iowa, Multi-pronged early literacy education, Tutoring and quality time out, and support for youths with disabilities). The first three strategies address the identified problem of low academic performance. The fourth strategy, support for youths with disabilities, is a much needed social service; however, this strategy does not directly address the academic achievement gap. The applicant describes AmeriCorps members' roles in the development of print resources, outreach and tutoring, which will enable teachers to better tailor instruction needs of children, and reduce instructional group size. These member activities have been proven to improve student skills.

COMMENTS: (+) The applicant is working in the city of Cedar Rapids Iowa and combines national, state and local statistics to clearly state the problem that low reading ability stays with the student to high school. Low income students are targeted in this project. It is stated that the floods in 2008 coupled with the economic downturn have led to even more problems with low income families and that the high school dropout rate has nearly doubled over the last 5 years. The specific schools where this program will be initiated are identified and information about each school is provided. Each school has a high proportion of students from low income families (53% to 90%) and also demonstrate a high percentage of low reading levels (35% to 47% are not proficient). (+) AmeriCorps members will have a college degree, demonstrate an interest in education, and working with low income youth or students with disabilities. The tasks for each of the 10 AC members are clearly defined. There are several program areas described including the following: Play and Learn, Early Literacy, tutoring, REAP, and Assistance to families with disabled child(ren). (+) The applicant has specific training identified for each specific program area as well as the

required orientation AmeriCorps members will also be invited to participate in staff trainings and will be required to attend monthly meetings that will have a training component. (+/-) The measurable impact of AmeriCorps members is not addressed directly, but the past history of the organization (United Way of Eastern Iowa) is cited in the section about organizational capacity. The program structure seems well designed so that the opportunity of AmeriCorps members to have measurable impacts is high. The methodology for measuring is varied and is likely to capture the important parameters. (+) The members who are posted to The ARC (for families with children with disabilities) are filling a need that appears to have been unmet for some time.

COMMENTS: The project offers a comprehensive set of activities designed to respond to the growing needs of low-income students throughout the educational pipeline to offer continuous, year-round services. However, the applicant does not provide data regarding high school drop-out rates or students with disabilities which are two of the four activity targets. The project does benefit from a long standing relationship with the community and organizational support to implement the proposed activities while engaging students, families and volunteers. To ensure that AmeriCorps members are properly trained there will be organization- and site-based training efforts offered as well as on-going training opportunities throughout the service term. To make the service more meaningful and professionally developing, there will be opportunities for AmeriCorps members to lead projects and participate in board and committee meetings to better understand service and leadership roles. The project will benefit from AmeriCorps member services in the growing stages of sustainable program development.