

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

2013 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: United Way of Dane County

Application ID: 13AC145159

Program Name: Schools of Hope AmeriCorps Project

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

(+) The applicant provided a persuasive case for this specifically targeted segment of elementary students (low-income and students of color) in three Dane County, WI, school districts, by providing federal and state statistics on poverty, race, educational achievement, and English Language Learners.

(+) The applicant stressed the fact that their project works in coordination with the school system and aligns well with the state and United States Department of Education's plans for required improvement of the targeted "Schools of Hope" that have also been labeled as "Focus Schools" by the United States Department of Education.

(+) The applicant provides a well-defined description of the project's focus for addressing community problems: supporting the academic needs of Black and Latino students and students from low-income families by providing high-impact early interventions.

(+) The applicant provides strong support to indicate that the target communities are economically disadvantaged as it is indicated that in the past fifteen years the percentage of children living in poverty has nearly doubled.

(+) The applicant stated that AmeriCorps members are essential to the success of this program for their role as tutors and for coordinating the 800+ community volunteer tutors they recruit and manage. The school system cannot afford to appoint a staff person to do this job.

(+) In addition, data are provided to describe the economic conditions of Madison and the nearby communities being served. These data suggest that poverty is growing as evidenced by the number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch doubling and the changing demographic of people.

(+) The population being served is specified by targeting 3rd graders, which the proposal notes is an important transition year for students' reading development.

(+) The proposal notes that this project furthers a larger district goal of eliminating the achievement gap within the

schools.

(+) The AmeriCorps members provide individualized attention to students who otherwise would not receive it.

(+) A subset of the Members will possess critically important bilingual skills in order to work with targeted Spanish-speaking students.

(+) In addition, it is made clear that the expected outcomes of the project generally involve decreasing the achievement gap, and increasing positive student – adult interactions and engagement.

(+) The application specifies how the goals will be measured. For example, engagement will be measured by volunteer participation levels and surveys as well as principal and teacher surveys and focus groups.

(+) There is a description of the Madison School District’s data system, which enables more focused analysis to enable the intervention to be more tightly linked to the outcome. For example, the data system enables a comparison between tutored students in the program and demographically similar students in the district.

(+) The application includes a unique approach of having AmeriCorps members act as volunteer coordinators at local schools, as the schools are unable to support such a position.

(+) A compelling case for implementing an evidence-based tutoring model that will target at-risk students is provided, along with an explanation regarding how the target population was selected.

(+) The applicant defines the need for Members in a variety of slot types. These slots are aligned within summer school preparation programs as well as during the school year activities.

(+) The applicant provides a well-defined explanation of the impact of the AmeriCorps investment. Through the use of an outside evaluator, the applicant determined that students found academic success using triangulated measurements. This information supports clearly the positive impact of the investment.

(+) The United Way of Dane County has established strong partnerships with local schools.

(+) The applicant demonstrated impact of the program by comparing their tutored students to a demographically similar group and by using various assessments.

(+) The applicant pointed to their past success as a much replicated AmeriCorps program and discussed their employment of an external reviewer to assess their project.

(+) The applicant clearly describes an evidence-based and evidence –informed intervention that has had a record of proven success, according to rigorous evaluation findings.

(+) The applicant describes how the individualized services provided by AmeriCorps members will accomplish positive changes in the lives of participating students that would not otherwise occur.

- (-) The applicant provides limited details regarding a measurable community impact of the AmeriCorps investment.
- (-) Details regarding targeted goals and the expected impact of the program are unclear.
- (-) Details regarding gaps in existing tutoring services and current resources are limited. For example, it is unclear why current volunteers are unable to meet the needs of the targeted schools.
- (-) The overall impact is somewhat unclear as the performance measure plans to assess a greater gain in literacy by the Schools of Hope (SOH) cohort in comparison to a similar non-tutored group. The applicant does not define what constitutes a “greater gain”.
- (-) The application provides a limited description of what the expected change will be, with respect to the goals of the intervention. For example, there is minimal description about how much of a decrease in the achievement gap is expected from the project.
- (-) The applicant does not provide specific numbers of students who will improve their literacy levels or provide growth rates for the students enrolled in their program.
- (-) The applicant does not clearly indicate that what this organization will accomplish that would not otherwise be accomplished through existing staff or volunteers. For example, the applicant states that school staff surveys indicate that the Members are assets but does not indicate that the services could not be provided by the schools.