

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Southwestern Illinois College
Program Name: Belleville AmeriCorps

Application ID: 14AC157501

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:

Strengths:

The applicant proposes to address the achievement gap of low-income students in the community of Belleville and provides ample data from reputable sources about poverty levels of the target population.

The applicant provides data that is pertinent to the local context of the Belleville School District and indicated that students who participate in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program are 3-4 times more likely to lag behind in reading and math (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013).

The applicant provides data to support the argument that the need is worsening. For example, there is a population increase in the low-income demographic in Belleville (US Census Bureau, 2010 and City-data.com, 2013).

The applicant presents a compelling case for combined services to improve academic achievement in Belleville students by citing current research indicating disparities in educational outcomes by family income and providing local data indicating the existence of this gap in Belleville, Illinois.

The applicant substantiates the need for neighborhood revitalization coupled with a multi-front effort to strengthen the ability of low income students to succeed in school, providing local data that indicates increasing poverty levels, poverty rates of over 50%, and low income students 3-4 times more likely than higher income students to do poorly on Illinois State Achievement tests.

The applicant demonstrates the need for continuation and expansion of a multi-pronged intervention to support student academic achievement in two Belleville School Districts, citing comparatively high rates of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, violence, and student mobility. All of these factors contribute to student underachievement even as progress in being made on this front through the dedicated efforts of Belleville AmeriCorps members.

The applicant identifies areas of need for their proposal in the service area including national, state and local data

from credible sources.

The applicant documents a correlation between family income and achievement levels in core subject areas of math and science and verifies their conclusions by providing documented research studies by Sean Readon 2011.

The applicant provides evidence of a widening gap between families of free/reduced meal eligibility and other community families and supports their statements by providing data from the local and state boards of education.

The applicant documents that the poverty level for the county of the service area is 14.2%.

The applicant reports an increase in crime rates for the target service area as compared to neighboring areas and correlates a widening of the achievement gap in those areas between target population members and other community families.

The applicant has effectively demonstrated a severe and compelling community need, a widening achievement gap in impoverished communities, through its thorough presentation of statistics from numerous reports: Belleville School District Report Cards, local newspaper articles, Census Data, and applicant collected reports.

The applicant documents the prevalence of the need by providing relevant data indicating that the target community has significantly higher poverty rates than surrounding communities and noting that the intended schools to be served have poverty rates greater than 50%.

The applicant provides compelling support via the citation of several credible sources that its proposed intervention, after-school and summer academic programming for at-risk youth, can be accomplished efficiently and effectively through the use of AmeriCorps members. Through its proposed program, AmeriCorps members can expand the positive reach of the applicant organization, providing much needed services to the target population.

The applicant provides significant evidence of need by reporting that the target community's occurrences of homelessness among students, unemployment rates of parents, lack of kindergarten readiness, and mobility rates exceed the state average.

The applicant is proposing to use AmeriCorps members to maximize the effectiveness of existing programs by bridging gaps in existing services, promoting civic engagement, and emphasizing community leadership. The AmeriCorps members combined with the resources currently available are likely to be an effective method to make an impact in this community.

The program casts a wide net, proposing to partner with students, parents, teachers, neighborhood associations, faith-based organizations, and other community organizations to achieve outcomes for the student participants.

The applicant will use AmeriCorps members to strengthen the support system for the participants inside and outside the schools, and this is likely to lead to improved academic achievement for the participants.

The multi-component intervention to include direct student academic interventions such as after school/parent/community supports, community development, and summer camps incorporates the contributions of

trained AmeriCorps members in all programmatic components and is likely to be effective in addressing select areas of need within the targeted school districts.

Members leveraging of 2000 volunteers to engage in neighborhood revitalization efforts, to include development of after school programs based on a model successfully implemented in Belleville, is likely to be effective as a vehicle to support student academic achievement.

The applicant provides an abundance of evidence of the potential success of their program and the model selection including evidence of similar model usage involving a variety of partners from various aspects of the community whose goal is to improve civic and academic performance for target population members. This will positively improve a variety of aspects of their community, family and overall health and mental status.

The applicant clearly aligns their stated goals and objectives, program guidelines, and how implementation will improve performance on core academic achievement skills.

The applicant provides evidence and support by referencing non experimental studies which clearly supports their usage of this proposal.

The applicant has successfully demonstrated success in solving the identified problem by documenting over 20 years of high-performing, research-based, after-school intervention programs that serve as a model for positively impacting the academic performance of at-risk youth.

The applicant provides information about its past performance with AmeriCorps and asserts that all program targets were exceeded.

The applicant's past performance demonstrates success in Member tutoring, assisting with after school programs, mentoring of students, and contributing to school teams.

The applicant reports that AmeriCorps members exceeded all programmatic targets, both in terms of the number of students tutored as well as increasing student academic achievement.

The applicant verifies their ability to successfully manage federal programs, including having previously managed AmeriCorps awards, Title III programs, and a variety of federal and state projects.

The applicant documents having received a National Reporting Award for demonstrated skills in their financial department.

The applicant documents that the model used by their program is recognized as the State Model by The State Commission.

The applicant documents having tutored 1,195 students in 2 target school districts in 2013 which doubled their benchmark.

The applicant documents achieving 100% enrollment and a 93% retention rate in 2012-2013.

Weaknesses:

The applicant identifies the need as a gap in achievement between low-income students and other students but does not provide sufficient data about specific academic achievement.

The applicant does not clearly identify each source of evidence that they referred to.

The short term outcomes proposed are actually outputs, meaning that they measure how many people participate rather than any change in the condition, such as the attitudes of the participants.

The narrative does not provide evidence that the long-term outcomes are achievable with the proposed intervention.

The applicant does not provide any quantitative evidence supporting that the comprehensive program will lead to the proposed outcomes.

The absence of specific data/information related to the “evidence-base” of various programmatic components makes it difficult to assess the potential effectiveness of the intervention as a whole in this particular context. Additionally, this makes it difficult to determine the program’s relative merits as a comprehensive approach to raising overall levels of academic achievement in Belleville.

The applicant only provided one piece of data supporting that their program led to the desired outcomes (94% of participants demonstrated increased academic achievement).

The applicant does not provide specific data or information on progress made in closing the academic achievement gap.