

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY
2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Teach for America

Application ID: 14ES156836

Program Name: Teach For America-Atlanta

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 severity of need for educational improvement in the Atlanta area is supported by local statistics from reputable sources. Indicators cited include the academic achievement gap between low income and high income nine-year-olds, high school graduation rate, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and SAT scores, each of which confirms the existence of a marked difference that further disadvantages children growing up in low income areas.

The fact that the disadvantage noted in elementary school continues through high school, also affecting students' opportunity for higher education with its higher income potential reinforces the need for successful intervention that can disrupt a cycle of poverty and open pathways to academic and financial success.

The applicant states that in the four counties that it plans to serve, the students in these public schools "are already three grade levels behind their more affluent peers" according to the applicant's source: the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. As a result, these school districts average a high school graduation rate of 62% in comparison with the state of Georgia at 71.5% and the national average graduation rate of 75%.

The applicant states that there is an educational disparity along racial lines in the state which contributes to a lower than average high school graduation rate, especially for black males at 49% versus other males at 69%.

The applicant provides statistics regarding the future of students who drop out of high school, as a direct result of a pattern of poor academic performance. These included: incarceration; diminished earning potential and high jobless rates.

The applicant clearly identifies the problem to be addressed as being the need for additional educational supportive services for students attending schools identified as being Title 1 or those with high free and reduced lunch rates

which is indicative of high poverty. Comparative data was included to indicate the low graduation rates in the target areas compared to state and national averages.

The applicant's internal data collected from former AmeriCorps members suggest that AmeriCorps members' training and experience are related to their continued interest in education. Moreover, many alumni of the program have remained in the geographic area it serves.

Studies of other Teach for America programs suggest that the program promotes change in many communities by adding teaching capacity to classrooms which, in turn, leads to academic progress among students. The agency's long experience has shown positive academic progress among the majority of the AmeriCorps members' students amounting to at least one grade level.

The applicant clearly demonstrates how it will use AmeriCorps members to impact and help solve the community problem identified by identifying the low-income and "high-need schools" in the metro Atlanta area in which the applicant will place trained AmeriCorps members as teachers.

The applicant outlines in detail how it will provide comprehensive training and professional development, support and monitoring of the AmeriCorps members not only during the 2-year commitment, but before placement and after as alumni. By providing training and ongoing professional development and support to AmeriCorps members, the applicant will ensure that Members will be equipped to teach and to successfully solve the community problems the project intends to address.

The applicant references studies that evaluated other Teach for America programs across the country which suggests potential success if replicated similarly.

The studies referenced were current and assessed multiple grades, which is consistent with the proposed project which intends on serving students K-12.

With regard to the applicant's function as a teacher-training facility, Teach for America Atlanta's 13 years of growth and problem-solving has included forming ongoing collaborative relationships with school districts that serve both the applicant and the districts well, providing school settings for AmeriCorps members and bolstering the faculty of the district. Moreover, the applicant is agile, reporting how it has adapted to changing school budgets and calendars.

Over time, the applicant reports continuing to improve its support services to AmeriCorps members.

Non-experimental internal evidence indicates that Teach for America-Atlanta has retained past Members in the Atlanta area who remain involved in education, some as certified teachers thus easing the region's need for more qualified teachers.

With respect to the applicant's function as a direct contributor to the education of K-12 students, non-experimental evidence shows that the K-12 students of AmeriCorps members do progress. In the past, 80% of AmeriCorps members have seen satisfactory or better improvement in their students' academic achievement, i.e., they gain one year in grade level.

The applicant states that it has a 13-year history of operating the Teach for America program. Also, the applicant has a proven training format called “Teaching as Leadership” (TAL) which involves 6 strategies that they believe drive effective teaching and student success. These are core elements of the intended program that support the applicant’s strong past performance.

The applicant includes data to demonstrate strong commitment, retention, passing of teacher certification exams and placement among the Teach for America-Atlanta Members.

Weaknesses:

While the applicant refers to difficulty with teacher hiring, retention, and under-qualified teachers teaching subjects such as foreign language and special education, the need for more highly qualified teachers in the Atlanta area is not justified with statistical information.

Although the case for the need and problem are strong, the applicant did not provide ample, specific, relevant data to support the need for more teachers in all of the targeted school district areas.

Relevant data was not included to demonstrate the need for services or how these services will impact the target population. For instance, while the applicant indicates that there is a shortfall of high quality teachers in the service area, data is not included to support this. In addition the proposal does not contain data to support the claim that students as young as nine are three grade levels below their peers academically in the targeted schools.

Effect sizes and significance levels of students’ academic progress in AmeriCorps members’ classrooms compared with non-AmeriCorps member-led classrooms in the formal studies cited were not reported in the application.

The applicant reported no comparison between the achievements of AmeriCorps member’s students and those of other teachers in the program area.

The applicant did not fully address how they would work with AmeriCorps members who were at risk of dropping out of the program; or of those who are not able to meet the rigors of the classroom management and student achievement goals. As a result, it is unclear how AmeriCorps members who fall into these categories will be effective in their roles as teachers; or contribute to solving the project’s targeted community problems.

The applicant references a number of studies to support the proposed intervention of Teach for America Atlanta; however, these studies lacked details such as the number of students served and the number of teachers participating. In the study referencing math improvement scores, the specific percentage of increase was not included.

The net gain of academic improvement among students taught by Teach for America compared to other novice teachers was not provided.

Overall, the proposal does not include quantitative data to support the relevancy of the referenced studies to demonstrate impact of the proposed intervention.

Attention to student outcomes has been limited to non-experimental measures of progress in grade level. The rationale for the choice of one year's increase in grade level as the desired outcome was not fully explained.

In recounting past performance, positive student outcomes (grade level) and positive AmeriCorps member short-term outcomes (attitudes, skills, and opinions) and long-term outcomes (changes in career path) are reported. However, there is no mention of any change in the participating schools beyond their districts' increasing involvement with the applicant agency.

The applicant did not sufficiently address Teach for America Atlanta's goal to recruit more AmeriCorps members in the upcoming year, especially since during the past program year, they were only able to achieve 160 of their targeted recruitment goal of 184. The applicant did state that the local schools systems were not able to commit to as many slots as originally planned due to budget reductions. This year, Teach for America Atlanta proposed to recruit 275 AmeriCorps members, which is a much larger number compared to the 184 recruitment goal that they did not meet in the prior year.

The applicant did not provide information about the outcomes of the Teach for America Atlanta program for students. All of the past performance data focused on teacher recruitment, professional development and retention. Past performance data provided in the application relates to the teachers but does not describe success, impact and change in the participating schools. The degree by which the teachers have been successful in improving student test scores and overall academic achievement is not adequately supported by quantitative statistical data. Data regarding student improvements is not clearly described.