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Executive Summary

ACE: A Community for Education proposes to have 106 AmeriCorps members who will provide daily, intensive, individualized reading interventions to 2000 kindergarten, first, and second grade students (using a Reading Corps, Response-to-Intervention model) in 32 high-poverty schools in Central Texas (Travis County). At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps members will be responsible for 75% of the students we serve reaching at least one grade level benchmark in reading. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage an additional 25 total volunteers who will be engaged in supporting projects at ACE schools, building support for ACE in the community, and providing books for students in ACE schools.

This program will focus on the CNCS focus area of Education. The CNCS investment of \$1,315,902 will be matched with \$1,787,036, \$920,000 in public funding (local, state, and federal funds), and \$867,036 in private funding).

Rationale and Approach/Program Design

PROBLEM/NEED: ACE meets a critical need for improved literacy outcomes for low-income students in the Central Texas region in Austin and Manor (a smaller and more rural city east of Austin.). Texas is ranked 34th out of 50 states in measures of child health and education, and the Austin area is no exception (Kids Count Data Center, 2014). Central Texas faces some of the greatest challenges in closing the achievement gap to ensure a well-educated workforce. Census data shows a 40% increase in Austin's Hispanic community between 2000 and 2010, with that rate expected to continue, and half the population of Manor as Hispanic. Central Texas also has the fastest growing pre-school population in the country (E3 Alliance, 2013). Nearly a third of all children in the Austin area (20% in Manor) live below the poverty line, with Hispanic residents making up the largest segment of impoverished residents (City of Austin Data). ACE: A Community for Education works in low-income schools that are located in the poorest communities in Austin and in Manor. In current ACE project sites, the majority of students are considered economically disadvantaged (94% Austin ISD, 82% Manor ISD, 56% Wayside Charter Schools), and 97% of students across all sites are minority (predominantly Hispanic). On average, students at ACE sites are 78% Hispanic and 19% African American.

The challenges to early childhood education loom large in ACE project school communities, and are reflected in school readiness data showing that nearly half of Central Texas children are unprepared for kindergarten, and only 30% of low-income children demonstrate academic readiness (E3 Alliance,

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2013). Nearly 60% of all kindergarten students in ACE schools demonstrated significant risk in measures of early reading skills at the beginning of the year, (based on 2014 ACE reading assessments). This aligns with what research has predicted. A series of longitudinal studies by Hart and Risley (1995-2003) show in stark terms that family income can impact exposure to reading and vocabulary at home in the early years of a child's life: low-income children heard 30 million fewer words total by age three than did more affluent children. National, seminal research clearly and consistently demonstrates that early gaps in learning can result in persistent academic challenges (National Reading Panel, [NI CHD, 2000], Preventing Reading Difficulties [National Academy Press, 1998], the Matthew Effect in Reading [Stanovich, 1986]).

Research has also shown that without remediation, children who are poor readers in first grade have a .88 probability of still being a poor reader in fourth grade (Juel et al., 1988). The Texas state accountability statewide reading results (STAAR) reveal on average 32% of third grade students failed the reading portion of the STAAR test last year in the 24 Austin Independent School District (AISD) schools where ACE members will work (results for Manor and Wayside Schools are not yet available). In six of those ACE schools, nearly half of the students failed the reading portion. That statistic is especially worrisome in light of national research proving that low-income and minority children who cannot read at grade level by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school (Annie E. Casey, 2013).

It takes four times longer to remediate a student's poor reading skills in 4th grade as in kindergarten or early 1st grade (Rethinking special education for a new century, Lyon et al, 2001). Yet because of high-stakes state accountability testing beginning at grade 3, and a finite amount of resources for our urban schools, most reading intervention resources are focused on upper elementary grades even though it is much more effective to intervene earlier. Finally, at the same time that Central Texas schools are facing a significantly increased need for early intervention through increased poverty rates, their resources to meet that need have been severely constrained by significantly reduced resources from the state legislature. This underscores the need for community partners to work effectively with the schools to support needed services.

A further need in the Central Texas community is for bilingual early literacy support. Both Austin and Manor have robust bilingual or dual-language programs with the goal of monolingual Spanish speaking students becoming bilingual and bi-literate in English and Spanish. Many monolingual Spanish speakers demonstrate significant gaps in reading skills in their native language, and face the dual challenge of catching up in one language and mastering speaking, reading, and writing in a

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second language. All ACE schools face challenges in providing this level of intervention support in both languages. Since its inception in 1994, ACE has been a fully bilingual program, providing interventions in both English and Spanish. ACE is unique among school district community partners in Austin and Manor in being able to provide a robust, bilingual intervention model during the school day, with 40-50% of our members demonstrating fluency in Spanish and English.

In summary, our community has a well-documented achievement gap at school entry for low-income students, and the two populations with the greatest need (English Language Learners and children living in poverty) are growing at a rapid rate. ACE directly addresses the reading achievement gap between affluent and poor children that is evident at kindergarten and is correlated with poor educational attainment if not addressed. The research is crystal clear: early intervention is the most cost-effective means of preventing future reading and learning difficulties. ACE was founded on this premise and the research supporting it. Ensuring that low-income children can read well by third grade is our sole focus and our mission.

THEORY OF CHANGE

ACE addresses the serious and prevalent need for early literacy interventions in Central TX in an effective and efficient manner by recruiting, engaging, training, and supporting full-time AmeriCorps members (and part-time AmeriCorps members working in a full-time capacity) to provide daily, research based bilingual interventions to young struggling readers in high-need elementary schools. Since 2009, ACE has adapted the Minnesota Reading Corps' (MRC) response-to-intervention model as a blueprint to scale the program to meet the local needs of Central TX. This combination of the science of reading and the effective use of the manpower resource of AmeriCorps members allows ACE to partner with our highest need elementary schools to help close the achievement gap in reading by third grade for our diverse population. AmeriCorps members make a unique contribution to meeting this need and in a cost-effective way. Only 25% of our districts' high-poverty project schools have reading specialist staff dedicated to improving reading in the early grades (K-2), therefore many children do not receive the interventions that would prevent future reading difficulties. It would take 50 volunteers each week working 1 hours/day to provide what one ACE AmeriCorps tutor delivers weekly to our project schools. Through our partnership with AmeriCorps, ACE is able to provide this support at a cost to the local community of \$770/child. ACE has consistently found that at least two-thirds of all students we serve do reach grade level benchmarks by the end of the year, and a comparison group analysis found a causal relationship for the impact of ACE tutoring for foundational reading skills.

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NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF LOGIC MODEL (see attached logic model for specific inputs, activities, outputs, and short-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes): ACE effectively utilizes the human and financial resources of AmeriCorps, the University of Texas at Austin, and our state and local community to address the serious and pervasive need for early reading intervention for economically disadvantaged and linguistically diverse students in kindergarten through second grade in Central Texas. Our primary activity is the one-to-one, daily, reading intervention provided by ACE AmeriCorps members. ACE members, working with ACE and project school staff, screen K-2 students at project schools at the beginning of the year (BoY) using nationally recognized early reading assessment tools (DIBELS/IDEL/AIMSWeb) to determine eligibility for the program, then build a caseload for each member of 10 students. These students receive 30 minutes daily of research-based ACE reading interventions, and are monitored for progress each week with a 1-minute assessment. Students graduate from the ACE program at different times, using stringent criteria and norms that we know predict a student will continue to thrive without tutoring. ACE members tutor a total of 20+ students across the year. ACE also conducts middle- and end-of-year benchmark assessments (MoY and EoY) of all K-2 students (those in program, those who have graduated, and those students we screened at BoY), and we track participation in the ACE program across years. ACE members also provide considerable after-school and weekend service to our project schools and approved partner organizations where members accrue additional service hours.

ACE tracks considerable data (outputs) on the students we serve, as well as the retention rates for members and the training and professional development they receive. This ensures that ACE is on track to meet the benchmarks that predict successful program outcomes (see logic model for specific outputs). ACE has robust evidence of significant outcomes of our research-based reading corps model. For example, two experimental design studies have shown that ACE-tutored students make accelerated progress in foundational reading skills as a result of participation in the program (short-term outcomes). We expect that, as we are able to track student's progress through school, ACE students will be successful on state accountability measures of reading in third grade and beyond, and that closing the early reading gap will set them on a trajectory of success in school, with more students graduating from high school "college and career ready". We also track outcomes for ACE AmeriCorps members, who consistently report that ACE had a powerful impact on career choice, and in understanding poverty and the role of public education in a democracy. Many ACE alumni become teachers and they tend to stay in the classroom beyond the 3-year national average. Thus, over time, ACE is helping build an education workforce that is knowledgeable about early reading intervention,

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experienced in serving economically and linguistically diverse students, and choosing education as a career.

EVIDENCE BASE: STRONG EVIDENCE:

Since our inception in 1994, ACE early literacy interventions have been based on national reading research that identifies the foundational skills children must master before third grade in order to become a skilled reader (e.g. National Reading Panel, Preventing Reading Difficulties, What Works Clearinghouse). ACE interventions focus on these key skills: phonological awareness, alphabetic principle (letter sound fluency), phonics, and oral reading fluency, each of which has been validated by this research as predictive of reading success. Struggling readers are likely to show deficits in these foundational skills, and when children master these skills during the early grades, they are much more likely to read well by third grade.

During the 2012-2015 grants cycle, ACE completed two separate evaluations using Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD). The Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse has designated RDD as a gold standard experimental design--equivalent to a Randomized Control Trial. Dr. Sharon Vaughn and the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk in the College of Education at University of Texas at Austin conducted the required external evaluation of the ACE program in 2012-13, which included the RDD design analysis (N=1082). This evaluation concluded that ACE does accelerate young children's reading achievement in kindergarten and first grade (in both English and in Spanish) relative to a comparison group, and that this is a causal relationship. In 2013-14, the research team at the Charles A. Dana Center at UT completed a second RDD comparison analysis (N=2234), which included a more sensitive variation of RDD and which confirmed ACE program impact.

Specifically, in 2012-13, the Meadows Center RDD evaluation found significant results at kindergarten and first grade ($p < .01$) between ACE and non-ACE students. Results indicated that ACE is significantly impacting the acquisition of key foundational skills for students we serve (letter sound fluency, and word reading/phonics). There were no significant differences on the RDD evaluation at second grade for oral reading fluency in either language. The 2012-13 external evaluation by the Meadows Center also included these results: on average 73% of ACE tutored students met grade level benchmarks in critical reading skills within the treatment year, and that only 10% of students re-entered the program the following year. Qualitative feedback from teachers, principals, and members was resoundingly positive about the effects of the program and the quality of the AmeriCorps members' service year.

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The 2013-14 RDD evaluation conducted by the evaluation team at the Dana Center at UT-Austin confirmed the impact at K and 1st grade ($p < .05$ to $.001$) for foundational reading skills, and with moderate to strong effect sizes (.2 to .8). Significant results were found for both English and Spanish interventions. It's important to note that consistently positive effect sizes were found for all grade levels and language groupings, and the fact that the Regression Discontinuity Design did not find all of these effects statistically significant may be attributable in part to the conservative nature of this statistical technique. ACE continues to analyze oral reading fluency interventions at first and second grade and is working with UT reading researchers in 2014-15 on improved outcomes.

These results mirror the results of the 2012-13 NORC Randomized Control Trial evaluation of the Minnesota Reading Corps. ACE has consulted with the MN Reading Corps (MRC) since 2009 to adapt the Reading Corps and Response-to-Intervention model to local needs in Central TX. Both reading corps models (MN and TX) have our strongest results at kindergarten and first grade in these foundational skills.

As a program of the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, ACE has access to world-class education researchers. This has allowed ACE to embed a consistent research design into our work. In ACE, we use data to drive instruction, and then analyze results to improve intervention outcomes. We expect to continue the RDD design every other year, and will meet and/or exceed the CNCS external evaluation requirement in 2015-18. This attention to rigorous use of data sets ACE apart from other community tutoring programs in Central Texas, and from most other AmeriCorps reading tutoring programs.

CNCS NOTICE PRIORITY PROGRAM IN EDUCATION

ACE AmeriCorps members create improved educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged children; they ensure that children who typically start school a year or more behind their more advantaged peers on school readiness skills can read at grade level by third grade, empowering them to improve in all subject areas of future schoolwork. ACE specifically aims to improve educational outcomes of students in low-income elementary schools in Central Texas (Austin and Manor), in which over 80% of students on average qualify for free or reduced lunch. Our continuing success rate in which at least two-thirds to three-quarters of ACE students reach grade level in critical early reading skills by the end of the school year annually, in addition to the result of a robust, quasi-experimental evaluation using gold standard methods (Regression Discontinuity Design), serve as proof that ACE truly improves the educational outcomes of these at-risk students.

MEMBER TRAINING

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The hallmark of ACE is our intensive research-based member training, supervision, and support that begins with a weeklong pre-service training (PST), and continues with weekly, on-site supervision and coaching throughout the year by ACE's staff of early childhood and literacy experts. PST includes preparation for direct service (i.e. training on the ACE assessment tools and reading curriculum), orientation to AmeriCorps and members' rights and responsibilities, team-building and civic reflection opportunities. PST also prepares members for working in low-income elementary schools, including a review of community need and school district and ACE policies and procedures. PST makes explicit the ACE mission and goals as well as program expectations of members. We review all prohibited activities, including disallowed activities that may occur in a school or after-school setting. We conduct a detailed review of the member service agreement and position description, which include all prohibited activities and a roadmap for success in accruing all service hours. PST includes a week of introduction to early literacy, ACE lesson plans, lesson framework (including practice sessions), and the Response-to-Intervention model for assessment and progress monitoring. Second year ACE members (ACE Leaders) coordinate the team building and civic reflection activities with support from ACE staff. PST also includes training on the role of national service programs in disaster relief efforts. This training covers the four phases of a disaster (preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation) and the responsibilities of AmeriCorps programs in the event of a local or state disaster. Training is embedded in our member supervision model, and continues throughout the year in three ways. First, ACE's staff of early childhood and reading experts meets weekly with members on-site at their assigned campus to coach and support them in effectively delivering the reading interventions to each child they tutor. This is the heart of our program model: scaffolded training and support for each member in real time to ensure children receive a high-quality intervention. Second, ACE staff provides 4 additional half- or full-day trainings in September through January on specific aspects of the reading interventions (data management, introducing additional lesson components, etc). Third, our yearlong training plan also provides members with leadership and team-building training, personal growth opportunities, and a robust Life after AmeriCorps training that involves experienced community members as presenters (e.g. practice interviews, job search strategies using social media, and preparing resumes). ACE members have weekly meetings at their campus, and learn firsthand how to create and support an effective team. In summary, the ACE training model incorporates intensive literacy training as well as guest speakers, member-led meetings, and reflection activities that together form a meaningful and effective service year for ACE AmeriCorps members.

MEMBER SUPERVISION

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ACE members are supervised by ACE Program Coordinators, who each supervise six schools and about 20-24 members. Every week throughout the year, these ACE staff, who are literacy experts, demonstrate and model tutoring techniques and strategies, observe tutoring sessions, and meet one-to-one with each member at their site. This embedded training and intensive supervision model is critical to our successful outcomes and provides continual professional development for our members in real time. Member surveys regularly find that ACE members felt supported throughout their term of service in both direct service activities, as well as in personal growth goals.

ACE ensures that members do not participate in prohibited activities through explicit training during PST about rights and responsibilities and through our weekly intensive supervision model. ACE provides key school staff (principals and reading specialists) with a half-day orientation to ACE and AmeriCorps regulations, including prohibited activities. School staff then conducts a site-specific orientation on ACE members' first day in the schools. When ACE staff is not present on campus, teachers and reading specialists are adequately trained to respond to member questions or concerns. ACE's AmeriCorps Systems Manager also communicates information about prohibited activities to community partners annually through a written MOU that outlines these disallowed activities. This ensures that after-school partnerships comply with all guidelines.

ACE program coordinators work under the ACE Education Director, a reading specialist with eight years of experience with ACE AmeriCorps members. She meets weekly with all program coordinators. The ACE Program Director and the AmeriCorps Systems Manager provide training to new employees on our program model and on AmeriCorps rules/regulations. ACE supervisory staff has many years of expertise in our methods and goals, either through graduate studies in childhood literacy or multiple years of previous teaching or tutoring experience. Six ACE program staff are former AmeriCorps members, and can offer this perspective and support to current members.

MEMBER EXPERIENCE

ACE's member orientation, training, supervision, reflection and project based activities not only prepare members to meet ACE's primary mission of improved literacy outcomes for economically disadvantaged students, but also help them to develop as personal and professional leaders, no matter what profession they choose. Because of our education emphasis, we find that ACE develops future education and non-profit professionals who have a deep understanding of literacy and of the lives of children and families living in poverty. ACE's 2014 alumni survey revealed that 60% of ACE respondents have gone on to pursue careers in education, and 10% have pursued careers in nonprofits, but ALL ACE members gain a profound understanding of the realities of urban, low-income schools

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and communities, the role of public education in a democracy, and the need to build educational equity for all children. ACE also provides members opportunities to get to know the wider community through service projects and afterschool partnerships. ACE FT members spend 6 hours/week afterschool or weekends in volunteer work at their campus or with approved community partners-- local nonprofit organizations focused on education or poverty. These partnerships allow members to understand the broader implications for families living in poverty, and to explore particular career options or to build skills for their future careers. As a result of these opportunities and service, ACE members know that they are changing lives, and 98% report that their national service term has been meaningful and transformational. This fact is supported by our high retention rate (95% in each of past three years). Alumni consistently report, even years later, that service in ACE and AmeriCorps had a profound impact on who they are and on their career choice. Moreover, because ACE has a diverse corps of members, we foster friendships across cultural, age, and ethnic boundaries. ACE utilizes the nationally recognized Civic Reflection curriculum as a structured way to provide members with opportunities to reflect on their own service, and the relationship of this service to communities they serve. Three ACE staff have been trained as Civic Reflection facilitators and trainers, and provide at least four small-group, civic reflection activities throughout the year. We also empower second year members (ACE Leaders) to lead weekly debriefs and reflections at their campus. ACE leaders receive additional training and support from staff all year in leading teams, conflict resolution, and critical conversations. ACE Leaders report that ACE provides them with a safe and supportive environment for learning these "soft skills" that are crucial in every workplace. ACE provides many opportunities to develop an esprit de corps with the over 300 other AmeriCorps*State members serving in Austin, as well as across streams of service (VISTA, NCCC, Senior Corps). These include the annual Austin AmeriCorps Awareness celebration that ACE helped to launch in 2003, and Mayor's Day of Recognition of National Service, as well as other cross-program trainings (e.g. Life After AmeriCorps, MLK Day). ACE provides all members opportunities to be leaders in project planning (e.g. National Days of Service, AmeriCorps Week) and project leadership (e.g. coordinating Family Literacy Nights at campuses). ACE provides a particularly meaningful service experience for members interested in pursuing careers in education. In 2011, we pioneered an innovative partnership with the Texas Region 13 Alternative Certification Program that allows qualified ACE members to obtain teaching certification during their term of service in ACE. Given the growing shortage of teachers, ACE believes that our partnership with Region 13 could become a national AmeriCorps model for members that results in teachers who

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embrace teaching as a career rather than a two-three year service experience. During their year in ACE, qualified members can become certified in bilingual elementary, secondary, special education, and math/science--all high-need positions for area schools. Last year 20 ACE members completed the program, and all were hired full time in local schools for the 2014-2015 school year. Schools are eager to hire ACE alums because of their deep experience in low-income schools and their skills in teaching reading. Previous alumni surveys found that 52% of ACE members who become teachers stay in the classroom longer than the three year national average. ACE is currently exploring other post B.A. teacher certification partnerships with UT-Austin and Texas State University that will allow qualified ACE members to become teachers.

ACE's Recruitment Coordinator is dedicated to hiring highly qualified AmeriCorps members as literacy tutors. ACE is a highly competitive AmeriCorps program, receiving 2-3 times as many applications as we have member slots. During the 2013-2014 school year we increased our outreach and recruitment efforts, including forming a recruitment data partnership with Teach for America. In addition to using the national AmeriCorps website, we attend job recruitment fairs at local colleges and focus extra attention on recruiting members from our local community, especially bilingual members. We also make strategic use of social media and ACE's website to reach a wider audience of potential members. We are committed to recruiting a diverse corps. We recruit from the UT-Austin disability outreach office and other student services in area colleges. In 2014-15, 18% of ACE members are first generation college graduates. We will also consider expanding the number of HT member slots (through slot conversion) in subsequent years of the grant cycle based on results in Year 1. This member slot type has promise for engaging retirees and mid-career members, and community college graduates, which also expands the diversity of our corps.

COMMITMENT TO AMERICORPS IDENTIFICATION

ACE Member identification with AmeriCorps begins on day one of PST and continues throughout the year. We conduct our own swearing in ceremony and induction on the first day of PST, where key stakeholders conduct the pledge of service. We educate members on the history of national service and emphasize that they are part of a national movement that is still a limited opportunity. We also emphasize their responsibility to educate others about national service and about AmeriCorps. Members create "elevator speeches" about their service in AmeriCorps and ACE. ACE members participate in a citywide swearing in during their first month of service. ACE members also proudly represent AmeriCorps while earning service hours through afterschool community partnerships and days of service. ACE works hard to increase visibility of the AmeriCorps brand. ACE members are

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provided with 4 shirts and a sweatshirt with the AmeriCorps and ACE logos, and are required to wear these at school and during service projects. All communications materials likewise emphasize our connection to AmeriCorps. ACE is clearly branded in all service and community sites as an AmeriCorps program, and provides orientation to AmeriCorps for all project schools annually. ACE has also been a leader in increased interaction among national service programs in Austin. ACE was also one of only two programs from the state of Texas recognized in 2014 for Innovations and Leadership in national service by America's Service Commission.

Organizational Capability

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND AND STAFFING: Community support for ACE is strong and growing, and ACE consistently works with a broad range of stakeholders to plan for program growth and sustainability. ACE has conducted two strategic plans, for 2012-15 and 2015-18, with representatives from schools, the University of Texas at Austin, foundation partners, and the community we serve. Additionally, ACE meets twice a year with principals, and school leadership (Superintendents and Curriculum Directors) to review program outcomes and to plan for continued support. School districts increased their support for ACE since 2012 from 15% to 25% during a time of fiscal constraint for local districts. This is a huge vote of confidence in the value of this partnership. ACE has consistently increased foundation, corporate and individual funding to support growth and expansion, and has met and exceeded the 50% match requirement in the past 5 years. Our partners recognize ACE for how we use data to drive instruction and to continuously improve our reading interventions. They recognize we consistently engage and retain a high-caliber corps of members and support their training and professional development.

ACE has an excellent history of successfully administering an effective AmeriCorps program. As an outreach program of the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, ACE has deep resources in grants management, including compliance and fiscal and programmatic oversight. As the fifth largest research unit in the UT System, the Dana Center manages multimillion-dollar federal, state, and privately funded initiatives, and is experienced in interpreting federal guidelines, OMB circulars, and monitoring of fiscal and grants management. The Dana Center and ACE have met or exceeded all fiscal, programmatic, and matching requirements during its 20 years as an AmeriCorps project. ACE's fiscal governance comes from UT-Austin and AmeriCorps, rather than a typical non-profit governance board. Strategic guidance has come from the Dana Center and ACE staff, bi-monthly input from ACE Advisory Board, and annual input from key community stakeholders. In 2006, ACE created the ACE Development Council, to help increase funding from individuals and

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corporations, and to build community awareness. In 2012, ACE reformed this group of passionate community members and education leaders, now called the ACE Advisory Board, to address four key needs: strategic guidance, accountability to stakeholders, increased awareness of ACE in the community, and fundraising. After a highly successful three-year period of exponential growth, our 2015-18 strategic plan will focus on strengthening and refining the systems that support the expansion, and devising the most sustainable method of further growth to reach as many Central Texas students as possible.

ACE staff in 2015-18 will be ACE Program Director, ACE Education Director, five program coordinators for K-2nd grade members (train, supervise, and support members in schools), ACE Development Director, two Development Specialists, AmeriCorps Systems Manager, two accountants (.75 total), an AmeriCorps Recruitment and Outreach Coordinator (to coordinate recruitment and enrollment), an Administrative Associate, and two program assistants (one to assist with K-2 program administration, one to assist the leadership team). Three positions, The ACE Director, Director of Development, and Education Director form a senior leadership team with the ACE program director. This staff structure will adequately support the expanded corps of members and increased administrative duties resulting from our exponential growth (172%) in the past three years, and build systems for future, sustainable growth.

The Dana Center and ACE staff exhibit a high level of engagement, investment, and ownership of the ACE AmeriCorps program. Only 4 of 17 current ACE positions have turned over since 2012. ACE staff has extensive experience in educational best practices, program management and administration, and research design and evaluation (e.g. ACE director has a Ph.D. in education, and ACE program coordinators hold advanced degrees, and/or have extensive experience with literacy interventions as teachers, reading specialists, or tutors). New staff orient to AmeriCorps grant requirements through OneStar trainings, and training provided by the program director, AmeriCorps Systems Manager, Dana Center fiscal staff, and program coordinators. The program director and AmeriCorps Systems Manager will effectively train all new staff on prohibited activities, enrollment and eligibility requirements, and AmeriCorps provisions.

COMPLIANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

ACE holds itself, subgrantees, and service site locations to the highest standards of performance, and if there is an issue with compliance, we have procedures to correct those problems. ACE relies on The University of Texas at Austin and the Dana Center, which together provide legal and fiscal oversight of all grants and contracts of the Charles A. Dana Center, including those of the ACE program. Within

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the Dana Center, Richard Blount, CPA and assistant director for business affairs, and a team of individuals including a financial analyst, a senior grants and contract specialist, and a human resources coordinator manage the financial, human, and material resources of the Center. The capacity of the ACE staff, Dana Center and UT-Austin to manage the ACE program is reflected in audits by the Texas Workforce Commission and Office of Inspector General that resulted in no significant findings, and in ACE's ability to meet or exceed match requirements and performance measures each year. UT-Austin infrastructure and highly qualified staff allow us to adapt to new requirements or unforeseen challenges, and to immediately addressing any compliance issues. ACE ensures compliance and accountability of members through weekly site visits and ongoing training. To ensure compliance and prevent compliance issues at our project sites, we include the AmeriCorps guidelines and prohibited activities in our annual Memorandum of Understanding with each school district and community partners. ACE has worked with OneStar Foundation to assess and improve all compliance systems, particularly regarding NSCHC, and had 100% compliance in the current NSCHC Assessment Period issued by CNCS (October 14-November 27, 2014). ACE staff also audit member timesheets and files, and enact corrective procedures (i.e. disallowing hours for an activity that might not meet guidelines) if necessary.

PAST PERFORMANCE FOR CURRENT AND FORMER GRANTEES

1) ACE has met and exceeded all performance measurement targets for aligned education performance measures ED1, ED2, ED5 in the last three years of program operations (2011-12 through 2013-14). This means that in each of these years, ACE met program participation and completion benchmarks, and that at least 75% of the students ACE served who qualified for tutoring did reach a grade level benchmark in reading by the end of the year. ACE is unusual among tutoring programs for measuring how many students closed the educational gap, not just exhibited growth. We set a high bar for performance measurement. 2) ACE has achieved 100% member enrollment in the most recent full year of program operations. 3) ACE has achieved 95% retention across the last three years of program operation, which exceeds the average retention rate for the state program portfolio (88%). ACE works toward 100% retention each year through multiple efforts that are central components of our model: A robust pre-service training that includes opportunities for members to set goals for their year of service, an emphasis on the importance of their work and the relationships with the children they tutor, weekly support from staff, and professional development opportunities that support transition to life after AmeriCorps. We provide tremendous support and coaching to all members, including monthly hour target reports that help members plan and stay on track to completion. Each

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year, members who leave without completing program requirements do so for different reasons--to take another job, because they realize the program wasn't a good fit for them, or they are released for cause. ACE staff conduct exit interviews with members who leave the program to help the program increase retention strategies. ACE believes the best retention strategy is to maintain and build upon our cohesive service community within our program. By keeping members invested in their service and providing more opportunities for professional growth, we do convey to members that completion of the service term will lead to even greater job opportunities in the future. 4) ACE has had no compliance issues or areas of weakness/risk identified during the last three years of program operations.

Budget/Cost Effectiveness

COST EFFECTIVENESS

The proposed budget for 2015-18 is adequate to support ACE program activities and is clearly linked to program outputs and outcomes. ACE operates a highly effective, cost efficient program, with very strong community support. The federal funds from AmeriCorps (45% of our budget) leverage additional local funds (55% of budget). Thus, we effectively raise reading achievement at project schools at a cost to the community of only \$770 per child--a much lower cost than typical tutoring programs. The intensive staff support we provide each member each week is the rationale for requesting the maximum cost per member for fixed amount grants of \$13,430 per MSY, for a total of \$1,369,860 from CNCS (102 MSY X \$13,430). We will leverage additional local funds of \$1,697,036 from diverse sources. ACE has met or exceeded the 50% funding match required of our program in the last two grant cycles.

BUDGET ADEQUACY

ACE is applying for FY 2015 AmeriCorps State Commission Fixed Amount grant. The budget has verified without mathematical errors, and ACE has adequate support from local sources to support all program activities (see list of funding sources and amounts in eGrants).

Evaluation Summary or Plan

ACE is required to arrange for an external evaluation of ACE program during the 2015-2018 grant. ACE plans to complete this evaluation during Year 2 of the grant (2016-2017). ACE is committed to ongoing program evaluation, and will plan to do an in-depth, experimental design study of ACE program outcomes, and also include qualitative responses from ACE stakeholders: project school staff, ACE AmeriCorps members, and community stakeholders.

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ACE addresses the serious and prevalent need for early literacy interventions in Central TX in an effective and efficient manner by recruiting, engaging, training, and supporting full-time AmeriCorps members (and part-time AmeriCorps members working in a full-time capacity) to provide daily, research based interventions to young struggling readers in high-need elementary schools. As a result of this work, ACE improves the reading skills of at least 75% of the children in the program, and also provides ACE AmeriCorps members with a productive and meaningful service experience. ACE also is building a teacher pipeline through our partnership with Region 13 Teacher Educator Certification program, and early indications are that ACE alums who become teachers stay in the classroom longer than the 3 year national average.

ACE will partner with a research team at the University of Texas at Austin's College of Education (Educational Psychology Department) to conduct the evaluation. The outcomes that will be assessed include: 1) How many students served by ACE reach end-of year grade level benchmarks in one year? How many students served by ACE reach at least one grade level benchmark and are on-track to reach end-of-year goals? 2) How many students served by ACE in Kindergarten re-qualify for tutoring in first or second grade? How many students served by ACE in first grade re-qualify for tutoring in second grade? How many students served by ACE in kindergarten through second grade meet minimum reading benchmarks on the third grade state accountability assessments? 3) Are ACE results consistent across all campuses and types of tutors? 4) Is there a statistically significant difference between ACE and non-ACE student groups, using Regression Discontinuity Design? 5) What level of satisfaction and what types of feedback do ACE stakeholders (school staff, ACE AmeriCorps members, community partners) provide at the end of the year? 6) How many ACE members become teachers each year, and how many ACE alums who are teaching stay beyond the 3 year national average?

The research hypotheses are 1) that ACE does have a significant impact on students' reading achievement at each grade level relative to the comparison group, and 2) that ACE stakeholders rate ACE program services highly, including that ACE AmeriCorps members have a meaningful and productive service experience with ACE.

The evaluation will use Regression Discontinuity Design, similar to previous experimental evaluations

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of the ACE program by external (2012-13) and internal (2013-14) evaluators. This is a gold-standard experimental design according to the What Works Clearinghouse for the Department of Education, and is considered equivalent in statistical power to a Randomized Control Trial. The comparison group will be K-2nd grade students in ACE project schools who are assessed with the same nationally recognized reading assessment tools three times a year as all ACE students (DIBELS/IDEL and AIMSWeb).

The evaluator must be experienced in using Regression Discontinuity Design, and have experience conducting similar education program evaluations using strong survey research tools in addition to RDD and descriptive statistics.

The budget for this evaluation will be \$50,000. ACE expects to engage a research team from the University of Texas College of Education's Department of Educational Psychology, where there is deep expertise of this nature.

ACE continuously integrates evaluation results into program improvements. ACE staff analyze student data monthly, and include school staff in this process. We also meet with the evaluator prior to, during, and after the evaluation to discuss implications of the results. Take together, our model allows for real time improvements to the tutoring lesson framework, more effective student selection and program exit criteria, and improvements to our tutor training and support each year.

Amendment Justification

N/A

Clarification Summary

JUSTIFICATION FOR COST PER MSY: CNCS has already reduced the cost per MSY from the requested maximum of \$13,430 to \$13,300. We strongly advocate for no further reduction in the cost per MSY for the following reasons. The ACE model is an intensive early literacy intervention where members provide daily, 1:1, individualized tutoring to young struggling readers. Our outcomes have been validated using the What Works Clearinghouse gold-standard methodology, and we know that these impacts, plus our high enrollment and retention rate, come from our careful attention to pre-service and ongoing training and supervision of members. On-site training is provided weekly to all members, and we carefully monitor for fidelity to the program. Tutors receive over 100 hours of

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literacy training and support, as well as professional development (civic reflection, Life After AmeriCorps, conflict resolution, disaster relief training, etc). Even with this commitment to close supervision (every supervisor has 20-24 members), ACE is a very cost effective, high-impact program, with a total cost of about \$1200 per child.

PROGRAMMATIC CLARIFICATIONS:

1. TUTORING REQUIREMENTS PER 45 CFR§2522.910-940:

A program in which members engage in tutoring for children must:

(a) Articulate appropriate criteria for selecting and qualifying tutors, including the requirements in § 2522.910 of this subpart, and certify that selected tutors meet the requirements in § 2522.910.

including the requirements in § 2522.910 of this subpart, and certify that selected tutors meet the requirements in § 2522.910:

ACE tutors are not employees of a LED. We certify that all ACE tutors have a GED or high school diploma. The majority of ACE tutors (more than 90%) are college graduates. Others typically have an associate's degree, or are taking a gap year during college to develop work skills and to explore career opportunities. ACE requires some college coursework or equivalent post-secondary work experience.

(b) Identify the strategies or tools it will use to assess student progress and measure student outcomes; ACE uses nationally recognized literacy screening and assessment tools (DIBELS/IDEL/AIMSWeb) to identify those students not making adequate progress in key early literacy skills. ACE tutors monitor progress weekly using these assessment tools, and conduct benchmark assessments three times a year (Beginning, Middle, and End-of-Year). ACE reports on how many students meet grade level criteria at the end of the year on these benchmarks, as well as conducting gold-standard comparison analyses using Regression Discontinuity Design.

(c) Certify that the tutoring curriculum and pre-service and in-service training content are high-quality and research-based, consistent with the instructional program of the local educational agency and with State academic content standards.

ACE tutoring curriculum is designed to address the key early literacy skills identified in the National Reading Panel, and consistent with the seminal research of Catherine Snow and Priscilla Griffith in their study called Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. The ACE lesson framework targets these specific skills: Phonological Awareness, Phonics, Word Study, and Fluency. Research has

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validated that young struggling readers are most likely to lack these foundational skills, and that skilled readers are automatic in accessing and using these skills. These skills are also part of the state curricular standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills). ACE provides in-depth training and weekly on-site support and supervision as ACE tutors deliver this evidence-based curriculum.

(d) Include appropriate member supervision by individuals with expertise in tutoring; and ACE staff who supervise tutors are all highly experienced in teaching reading. Most are certified teachers and/or have advanced degrees in education. The seven ACE staff who supervise the tutors and develop the curriculum have 147 years of teaching experience combined! ACE is known in our districts for providing intensive and targeted support to tutors so that the children we serve receive the best interventions targeted to their needs.

(e) Provide specialized high-quality and research-based, member pre-service and in-service training consistent with the activities the member will perform.

ACE tutor training is something that sets us apart from most community based tutoring programs and other AmeriCorps programs that provide reading support. Our tutors receive a week of pre-service training, and three additional half-day trainings during the fall semester. They also receive weekly, on-site support from ACE literacy experts who observe tutoring lessons for fidelity to the model, conduct data meetings regularly, and work with tutors and school staff to monitor that the interventions are effective for each child on the tutors' caseloads (Tutors see 8-12 students daily).

2. Please describe how all afterschool and weekend member activities are pre-approved by ACE program staff to ensure that they do not include any prohibited or unallowable activities:

All full-time ACE AmeriCorps members are required to serve an average of 46 hours per week in order to reach the minimum of 1700 service hours in a 10 month service term. Full-Time members serve 40 hours per week at their assigned elementary school and serve an additional 6 hours per week with an afterschool community partnership.

During pre-service training in September, ACE members are provided with a list of pre-approved afterschool community partnerships. Partnership options include afterschool volunteer activities at ACE service sites and volunteer opportunities with local non-profit organizations that meet a pressing

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need in the community.

All afterschool and weekend member service activities are pre-approved by the ACE AmeriCorps Systems Coordinator before the beginning of the service term. This process begins with a thorough review of the afterschool volunteer positions available in the 3 school districts served by ACE (Austin Independent School District, Manor Independent School District, and Wayside Schools). Afterschool positions that align with ACE's mission of providing direct service to low-income students and do not consist of any AmeriCorps prohibited activities are approved as acceptable service activities.

Examples of afterschool volunteer positions that have been approved for service hours include providing homework assistance to students in grades 3-5, supporting afterschool recreational clubs such as coaching a youth soccer team, or mentoring a group of students through the Boys and Girls Club afterschool program that is aligned with a particular school.

All afterschool or weekend service activities that support other local non-profit organizations off-campus are also pre-approved by the ACE AmeriCorps Systems Coordinator before the start of the member service term. This involves a thorough review of available volunteer opportunities with local non-profit organizations that have partnered with ACE previously and provide direct service to low-income communities. Before entering into a community partnership with a non-profit organization, the ACE AmeriCorps Systems Coordinator meets with the volunteer coordinator from each organization to discuss the roles and responsibilities of the volunteer position. This ensures that the partnering organization has a full and complete understanding of the AmeriCorps prohibited activities.

Creative Action, a local non-profit that supports the academic, social and emotional development of young people, is an example of an approved ACE afterschool community partnership. Some ACE members will volunteer afterschool with Creative Action and support the program's youth arts classes in a low-income neighborhood in East Austin. Another example of an afterschool community partnership is support that ACE members provide to the Capital Area Food Bank of Texas. This member service activity involves assisting the Food Bank in preparing and packaging donated food items for distribution to hungry families throughout Central Texas in low-income communities that our program serves.

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For all afterschool service activities, whether it is at the ACE member's elementary school service site or off-campus with a local non-profit organization, the member is required to complete an ACE Community Partnership Form that records the service hours the member completed each day. Both the member and the site's volunteer coordinator then sign this form. The completed form is received by ACE each month and stored in ACE's secure member file system.

If a member requests to serve in an afterschool or weekend service position that has not been pre-approved by ACE, the member is required to submit his or her request in writing to the ACE AmeriCorps Systems Coordinator with a full description of the volunteer position's duties and responsibility, schedule, and contact information for the site's volunteer coordinator. The ACE AmeriCorps Systems Coordinator then reviews the volunteer position to ensure that it does not violate any of the AmeriCorps prohibited activities and is aligned with ACE's mission of providing direct service to low-income communities. A phone or in-person meeting is then scheduled with the site's volunteer coordinator to clarify the service duties being performed by the ACE member and to make sure the partnering site understands the types of acceptable service activities an ACE AmeriCorps member may perform.

ACE has found that this system allows our program to build a strong network of community partners and provide essential volunteer support to meaningful programs that are also striving to close the achievement gap and to defeat poverty in Central Texas. Our approved afterschool and weekend member service activities allow members to serve their community beyond one-to-one early literacy tutoring. The thorough review process for approval ensures that members are never placed in a situation in which they are in danger of performing a prohibited or unallowable service activity. Finally, members are reminded of prohibited activities throughout the year, and are empowered to speak up at their service site if they were ever asked to do service that is not allowed.

3. Please explain whether the program has already selected the specific schools to be served by the program, or if not, what the selection process and criteria will be.

ACE works closely with our partner school districts to choose campuses. We will serve 32 schools in 2015-16. Thirty of these schools are schools we currently serve. The two new campuses have been identified: Sanchez Elementary and Pecan Springs Elementary in Austin ISD. The Associate Superintendents for Elementary Education requested ACE serve these two high-need campuses, and

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the schools met the criteria that ACE has set for campuses; that they be Title I campuses (at least 50% free and reduced lunch) and that the principal and staff agree to work with ACE using the Response-to-Intervention model we provide. In reality, 94% of students in ACE partner schools in AISD qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch.

STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT SLOTS CLARIFICATION ITEMS

1. What percentage of your slots will be targeted to recruiting members with disabilities? What is your program's plan, if any, for outreach and recruitment of members of the disability community?

ACE is an inclusive AmeriCorps program that provides accommodations for all members with disabilities. It is difficult to quantify the specific number of members with a disability that serve with ACE each year because some individuals choose not to disclose their disability to the program. ACE does, however, notify all members at the beginning of their service term of their right to request an accommodation to perform the essential functions of their position. ACE works closely with the University of Texas Office of Institutional Equity regarding any requested reasonable accommodations. This year, for example, one ACE member does have a physical disability and we were able to easily provide the necessary accommodations for the member to perform their service duties successfully.

For members that have a disability that is not readily apparent, such as a mental disability, ACE provides all service members with an Employee Assistance Program that provides them with appropriate resources and services to support them during their service term.

Although ACE does not target a specific percentage of slots for recruiting members with disabilities, we have strengthened the aforementioned measures because we strive to create a service culture that is inclusive of everyone.

Our recruitment plan involves extensive outreach to local colleges and universities as well as community organizations. Our goal on college campuses is for recruitment communications to reach all graduating students regardless of background. For example, ACE sends a recruitment email communication to all graduates of the University of Texas at Austin in the winter the spring semester, which includes any graduating students with disabilities.

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Going forward, ACE will continue to improve our recruitment strategies and program support so that anyone that desires to serve their country and give a year of service will be able to do so in our program with ease and confidence.

2. ACE is not requesting specific strategic engagement slots

3. ACE is not requesting no-cost MSY's

Continuation Changes

N/A

Grant Characteristics