

**U.S. Department of Education - EDCAPS
G5-Technical Review Form (New)**

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 08/12/2010 07:46 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Achievement First, Inc. -- , (U282M100002)

Reader #1: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Eligible Applicant		
1. Eligible Applicant	50	38
Contribution assisting disadvantaged		
1. Contribution	15	12
Quality of Project Design		
1. Quality of design	10	8
Quality of the Management Plan		
1. Quality Management Plan	25	22
Overall Comments		
Overall Comments		
1. Overall Comments	0	0
Total	100	80

Technical Review Form

Panel #2 - Panel - 2: 84.282M

Reader #1: *****

Applicant: Achievement First, Inc. -- , (U282M100002)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Eligible Applicant

1. In determining the quality of the applicant, the Secretary considers the following factors:
 - (i) The degree to which the applicant has demonstrated success in significantly increasing student academic achievement and attainment for all students, including educationally disadvantaged students, served by charter schools operated or managed by the applicant.
 - (ii) The degree to which the applicant has demonstrated success in closing historic achievement gaps for the subgroups of students described in section 1111(b)(2)(C)(v)(II).
 - (iii) The degree to which the applicant has achieved results for low-income and minority students that are significantly above the average academic achievement results for such students in the State.Applicants are invited to submit objective data that they believe would provide relevant information in support of these three factors, along with comparison data for similar schools, where available. In particular, the Secretary is interested in the following data: (1) Performance (school-wide and by subgroup) on statewide tests of all charter schools operated or managed by the applicant as compared to all students in other schools in the State or States at the same grade level, and as compared with other schools serving similar demographics of students; (2) annual student attendance and retention rates (school-wide and by subgroup), and comparisons with other similar schools; (3) where applicable and available, high school graduation rates, college attendance rates, and college persistence rates (school-wide and by subgroup) of students attending schools operated or managed by the applicant. When reporting data for schools in States that may have particularly demanding or low standards of proficiency (for example, see the report available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/201456.pdf>), applicants are invited to discuss how their academic success might be considered against applicants from across the country.

Strengths:

Strengths: The applicant makes a very strong case for the effectiveness of its programs, providing convincing evidence of significant gains both in overall populations and disaggregated populations (by ethnicity) summarized on pages 16-18 and 20-23. Evidence is provided that the achievement gap is closing for low socio economic and African American subgroups. The only concerning data (Hispanic 8th graders in Connecticut) that was reported will be thoroughly addressed by the applicant, with corresponding changes in plans and interventions (page 23). Comparisons include similar populations both by district and by state as well as comparisons to students that are not at risk. Attendance rates (pages 12-13) are impressive. All 27 students of the first graduating class were accepted to college (page 15). Plans are to disaggregate graduation and matriculation rates in the future.

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses: The applicant fails to provide evidence of effectiveness of programming for special education, English Language Learners, and Hispanic students (in New York), stating that in all but one grade level for special education the group sizes are too small to report publicly. Alternate data could be provided, such as grouping grade levels across states, rate of exiting from services (both special education and English Language Learners), growth rates in English proficiency in ELL students, and providing data from grades for these populations other than 4th, 8th, and 10th("capstone grades"). It is not clear why data is provided on math achievement at the middle school level that includes another charter school network (page 3). The table on page 6 would be more convincing if "proxy data" were not included that is from a different cohort (incoming 5th graders in 2008 instead of the cohort of fifth graders in 2004). In addition, the testing schedule was changed from fall to spring that year, so the data would be much cleaner if it went from 2006-2009. It is somewhat concerning that the lottery policy in New York state gives preference to educationally at risk students (pages 2-3) and the applicant does not clearly state when that policy began or if that has been approved at the federal level (which could impact funding under this grant). Many times throughout the application (for example, page 1, and page 8) a "blind

lottery" is mentioned, so the assumption is that this change is new. Although one school has already had a graduating class of seniors, the graduation rate is not provided, stating that "official graduation and matriculation rates are not available" (page 15) Retention rates are confusing (page 14), as the data is not clean, it includes students who have moved out of the district or been placed in specialized programs. Data is not provided for students who move from school level to school level (elementary, middle school, and high school) within the clusters, which would indicate satisfaction with the program.

Reader's Score: 38

Selection Criteria - Contribution assisting disadvantaged

- 1. The contribution the proposed project will make in assisting educationally disadvantaged students served by the applicant to meet or exceed State academic content standards and State student academic achievement standards, and to graduate college- and career-ready.**

Strengths:

Strengths: A very convincing case is made for the effectiveness of the model for students that are African American, and low socio economically (the large majority of their students and target population). The one senior class that has graduated from the applicant's schools has all been accepted to colleges. The outreach efforts appear to be very effective and the goal of at least as many students on the wait list as enrolled very ambitious. The core elements are well described and designed to contribute significantly to educationally disadvantaged students.

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses: A convincing explanation is not provided for the effectiveness of the model for students with disabilities, Hispanic students, and/or English Language Learners.

Reader's Score: 12

Selection Criteria - Quality of Project Design

- 1. The Secretary considers the quality of the design of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers--**
 - (i) The extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are clearly specified, measurable, and attainable. Applicants proposing to open schools serving substantially different populations than those currently served by the model for which they have demonstrated evidence of success should address the attainability of outcomes given this difference.**
 - (ii) The extent to which the design for implementing and evaluating the proposed project will result in information to guide possible replication of project activities or strategies, including information about the effectiveness of the approach or strategies employed by the project.**

Strengths:

Strengths: The applicant has a proven track record of effectively opening additional schools and adding to existing schools. The project outcomes are clearly stated (page 1) related to growth, graduation rates, college acceptance and matriculation rates, student attendance and retention, and sustainable budget. The critical elements of the core program are well described and directly connected to project elements (pages 24-29). The 5 project objectives (pages 30-31) are directly tied to the 2 project goals, and detail is provided in the tables on pages 31-34 related to measurements and timelines. Implementation will be informed and evaluated by a combination of ongoing budget analysis, annual strategic plans for each site with quarterly review by the executive team, and the identification and tracking of 30 key categories of readiness activities in the 5 months preceding the opening of a new school (pages 36-37).

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses: The outcomes for student achievement should be measurable and should include special education, English learners, and Hispanic students by group. Student achievement will only be measured by state test scores and only at the 4th, 8th, and 10th grade levels.

Reader's Score: 8

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan

1. **The Secretary considers the quality of the management plan and personnel to replicate and expand high-quality charter schools. In determining the quality of the management plan and personnel for the proposed project, the Secretary considers--**
 - (i) **The adequacy of the management plan to achieve the objectives of the proposed project on time and within budget, including clearly defined responsibilities, timelines, and milestones for accomplishing project tasks.**
 - (ii) **The business plan for increasing, sustaining, and ensuring the quality and performance of charter schools opened under this program beyond the initial period of Federal funding, including, but not limited to facilities, financials, central office, academics, governance, oversight, and human resources of the schools.**
 - (iii) **A multi-year financial and operating model for the organization, as well as a demonstrated commitment of current and future partners, and evidence of broad support from stakeholders critical to the project's long-term success.**
 - (iv) **A plan for closing charter schools supported, overseen, or managed by the applicant that do not meet high standards of quality.**
 - (v) **The qualifications, including relevant training and experience, of the project director, CEO/organization leader, and key project personnel, especially in managing projects of the size and scope of the proposed project.**

Strengths:

Strengths: The "Network Support" described on pages 4-5 appears to be comprehensive and has been effective in establishing the current network of 17 schools. Project responsibilities are assigned to each team. The executive team is well qualified and their responsibilities related to the project are described on pages 56-58. A clear plan for turning responsibilities over to the building personnel is in place that includes ongoing support and oversight as well as mentoring. The projected growth of the organization extends beyond the grant funding period with the same structure and tools (pages 43-44) and utilizing economies of scale. Plans are to run solely on public dollars at full scale, with the exception of Connecticut, because of funding gaps for charter schools in that state (page 47). The fiduciary relationship and management contract with the applicant's Network Support is voluntary (page 48). Letters indicating strong support for this project are included from key stakeholders such as the CEO of the Rhode Island Mayoral Academies, the chancellor of the New York City DOE, and the Assistant Superintendent of the New Haven Public Schools. A plan for closing underperforming schools is described on pages 55-56. A 5 year network support budget is included as well a 5 year budget plan for each school that is being expanded or replicated through the project.

Weaknesses:

Weaknesses: There are 13 additional teams mentioned on pages 41-42 and 44-45, without describing who is on those teams and what their qualifications are. The qualifications of the personnel to be added for staff development through the project are not described. The attached Detailed Network Support Budget could be clarified by showing how the project costs specifically relate to the total costs.

Reader's Score: 22

Overall Comments - Overall Comments

1. Please provide a summary of comments for this application. There are no points awarded in this section. Please enter 0 for the minimum and maximum scores.

General:

The application could have been made much stronger by clearly making as strong a case for Hispanic students, students with disabilities, and ELL students as it does for low socio economic and African American groups of students in current schools. This would then give more confidence in the purposeful replication efforts.

Reader's Score: **0**

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 08/12/2010 07:46 PM

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 08/24/2010 06:27 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Achievement First, Inc. -- , (U282M100002)

Reader #2: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Eligible Applicant		
1. Eligible Applicant	50	44
Contribution assisting disadvantaged		
1. Contribution	15	12
Quality of Project Design		
1. Quality of design	10	7
Quality of the Management Plan		
1. Quality Management Plan	25	22
Overall Comments		
Overall Comments		
1. Overall Comments	0	0
Total	100	85

Technical Review Form

Panel #2 - Panel - 2: 84.282M

Reader #2: *****

Applicant: Achievement First, Inc. -- , (U282M100002)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Eligible Applicant

1. In determining the quality of the applicant, the Secretary considers the following factors:
 - (i) The degree to which the applicant has demonstrated success in significantly increasing student academic achievement and attainment for all students, including educationally disadvantaged students, served by charter schools operated or managed by the applicant.
 - (ii) The degree to which the applicant has demonstrated success in closing historic achievement gaps for the subgroups of students described in section 1111(b)(2)(C)(v)(II).
 - (iii) The degree to which the applicant has achieved results for low-income and minority students that are significantly above the average academic achievement results for such students in the State. Applicants are invited to submit objective data that they believe would provide relevant information in support of these three factors, along with comparison data for similar schools, where available. In particular, the Secretary is interested in the following data: (1) Performance (school-wide and by subgroup) on statewide tests of all charter schools operated or managed by the applicant as compared to all students in other schools in the State or States at the same grade level, and as compared with other schools serving similar demographics of students; (2) annual student attendance and retention rates (school-wide and by subgroup), and comparisons with other similar schools; (3) where applicable and available, high school graduation rates, college attendance rates, and college persistence rates (school-wide and by subgroup) of students attending schools operated or managed by the applicant. When reporting data for schools in States that may have particularly demanding or low standards of proficiency (for example, see the report available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/201456.pdf>), applicants are invited to discuss how their academic success might be considered against applicants from across the country.

Strengths:

Several studies have indicated that Achievement First (AF) contributes to increased student achievement relative to other students in the same districts; propensity score matching yielded third year effect sizes of 0.9 years in math and 0.7 years in reading (Narrative, p. 3 and Section 5, pp. 1 - 5). Additional data on individual schools also supports the claim that they are accelerating achievement (Narrative, pp. 6 - 11).

With 99% African American or Latino students, and 72% low income, gap-closing within their schools is difficult to assess. In comparison to host districts, however, AF's low-income students' scores are within 4 points of non-low-income students in CT (Narrative, pp 16 - 17 and Section 5, pp. 5 - 12). Similar data is reported for NY (Narrative, pp. 17 - 18). AF's African American students' scores were also within a few points of White/Asian students in CT (Section 5, pp. 12 - 13). This gap was in fact closed in NY (Narrative, p. 21). AF's Latino/a students' scores are significantly lower (20 points) than CT state scores for Whites/Asians (Narrative, p. 22 and Section 5, pp. 15 - 16).

AF reports relatively high attendance and retention figures, though absent data from host districts, comparisons cannot be made (Narrative, pp. 11 - 12).

Weaknesses:

AF received an exemption to allow them to preferentially enroll student's "at-risk of academic failure," asserting that affluent students have other paths to a high quality education (GEPA, p. 2 and Narrative, p. 52). This assumes one, that these other students do indeed have alternate paths and two - more importantly - that concentrating "at-risk" students is the preferred approach to educating this population. They do not present data supporting either of these perspectives.

Gaps between AF Latino/a students and state White/Asian students persist (Narrative, p. 22).

Not enough data to determine college attendance and persistence rates (Narrative, p. 15).

Reader's Score: 44

Selection Criteria - Contribution assisting disadvantaged

- 1. The contribution the proposed project will make in assisting educationally disadvantaged students served by the applicant to meet or exceed State academic content standards and State student academic achievement standards, and to graduate college- and career-ready.**

Strengths:

AF endeavors to specifically recruit historically underserved students.

AF's program includes several elements that have been associated with increased achievement among historically disadvantaged groups: consistent, standards-based curriculum; use of interim assessments; increased time on task; focus on gap-closing; focus on HR; partnering with parents (Narrative, pp. 25 & 28).

AF appears to carefully attend to the needs of special education students, and has developed systems for tracking and timely intervention (Narrative, pp. 26 - 27). Inclusion is AF's default strategy for special education, as well as English learners (Narrative, pp. 27 - 28).

Students are exposed to "college knowledge" throughout their time at AF, in the form of college artifacts in the environment, "college talk," and field trips (Narrative, p. 29).

Weaknesses:

The AF program is based on a number of core principles, but it is unclear which are rooted in the research and which are legacy practices of the organization. It is unclear what the "proven" curriculum is (Narrative, p. 25). This is also a bit of a tautology: "We use this curriculum, students do well, and hence the curriculum is proven." This discounts alternative explanations.

AF's program for English learners is not well explained, and thus seems underdeveloped, relying primarily on classroom teachers (Narrative, p. 28).

"College knowledge" activities have only a small impact on students' ultimate decisions to attend college and their success while enrolled in college (Narrative, p. 29).

Reader's Score: 12

Selection Criteria - Quality of Project Design

- 1. The Secretary considers the quality of the design of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers--**
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 - (ii) The extent to which the design for implementing and evaluating the proposed project will result in information to guide possible replication of project activities or strategies, including information about the effectiveness of the approach or strategies employed by the project.**

Strengths:

AF is not attempting anything new with this proposal, just increasing the number of schools implementing what it has already developed.

AF has clearly outlined its outcomes and how they are to be evaluated (Narrative, p. 31 - 34).

Each of the objectives is closely related to their overall goals and the objectives, in general, are related to the proposed activities. The test score-based outcomes, number of schools opened, and financial targets are easily measured (Narrative, pp. 31 - 34).

AF's academic and operations systems would appear to provide multiple opportunities to share information across the organization, in order to enact adjustments to the program (Narrative, pp. 36 - 38).

Weaknesses:

One of AF's goals is to demonstrate that high performing schools can operate at the scale of a district, and to share their learnings with other districts (Narrative, p. 29). District - CMO comparisons are complicated by many variables, which may not support the modeling aspects. In addition, it is not clear how this sharing with districts will be accomplished. [Partnering with an LEA is one of the competitive priorities.]

Continuing AF's current approach is likely to yield schools with performance similar to current AF schools, but also may stifle innovation within AF.

AF's objectives are a bit diffuse, such as fostering an environment that is very attractive to students and teachers - defining and measuring this may be difficult (Narrative, p. 30).

Gap-closing measures are ambiguous: "closely-related to state averages" (Narrative, p. 32). College acceptance rate is not a particularly meaningful measure (Narrative, p. 33). The applicant could have included some measure of the support provided to students, not just the outcomes of college attendance, etc. (Narrative, p. 33).

Is "attractive" the best way to measure educational environment (Narrative, p. 33)? And is the retention goal (85%) reasonable? Even if it is, over 5 years, a school could conceivably lose 75% of its original teachers. The application does not include a measure of duration of tenure for teachers and principals.

Reader's Score: 7

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan

1. **The Secretary considers the quality of the management plan and personnel to replicate and expand high-quality charter schools. In determining the quality of the management plan and personnel for the proposed project, the Secretary considers--**
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 - (iv) **A plan for closing charter schools supported, overseen, or managed by the applicant that do not meet high standards of quality.**
 - (v) **The qualifications, including relevant training and experience, of the project director, CEO/organization leader, and key project personnel, especially in managing projects of the size and scope of the proposed project.**

Strengths:

AF has delineated clear timelines, which appear reasonable, given the extant resources (Narrative, p 38 and Section 6). AF's slow approach to growing each school allows for some flexibility to work out the inevitable issues faced by a new school.

The AF leadership team members each have extremely strong academic backgrounds and have worked in a variety of education-related organizations prior to joining AF (Section 1, pp. 2 - 21). Roles during the expansion are relatively clear (Narrative, p. 44).

AF has developed a network support model to provide services to its current schools (Narrative, p. 4). AF has developed robust systems for attending to and adjusting performance across the organization (Narrative, pp. 36 - 38).

AF's leadership development program will provide an additional source for school leaders (Narrative, p. 50). They are wisely not relying solely on this source.

AF has provided letters of support from NHPS, NYC's Chancellor, Rhode Island's mayoral Academies, two foundations, and a board member (Narrative, pp. 54 - 55 and Section 2, pp. 2 - 9). These represent robust commitment from partner entities and financial supporters. AF has secured substantial matching funds (Narrative, p. 46).

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not provide enough information to determine if the Executive Team has the capacity to shepherd these new schools through the development process, while continuing to support existing schools (Narrative, p. 40). The amount of time and energy required per school is likely to vary considerably - how much of a buffer (financial and HR) is built in to accommodate this? The breakdown of central office - school costs is detailed, but the overlap between initial start-up needs and ongoing needs is somewhat ambiguous (Section 6).

AF is committed to continuing to raise philanthropic funds, where necessary (e.g., in CT), though it is unclear if they will continue to be necessary elsewhere (Narrative, p. 47). Given that many organizations struggle with securing long-term philanthropic support, it would have been nice to see a budget predicated on only public dollars.

AF does not include letters of support from local communities/neighborhoods where the schools will be situated (Section 2). Local communities' role is acknowledged, but not particularly built into the plan (Narrative, p. 53).

AF's plan for closing is not particularly well-developed, and in fact is mostly a plan for intervention (Narrative, p. 56). It is not clear where would students go if one of their schools closed.

AF has faced challenges around teacher credentialing - it is unclear how serious or pervasive this is and how it is being resolved (Narrative, p. 49).

The leadership team, with only a couple of exceptions, does not include individuals with deep instructional knowledge or sustained classroom experience. This could impact the development and differentiation of their model across diverse locales, as well as the maturation of their model. At the school level, they no doubt employ some seasoned educators, but the relationship between schools' developmental trajectories and the guidance from their central office is unclear (Section 2, pp. 2 - 9).

Reader's Score: 22

Overall Comments - Overall Comments

- 1. Please provide a summary of comments for this application. There are no points awarded in this section. Please enter 0 for the minimum and maximum scores.**

General:

Overall, a strong application, well prepared and organized. AF has a strong program currently, and, apart from the comments above, seems well positioned to execute this plan. I would like to see them take this opportunity to develop new elements of their program and perhaps take some risks with designs that are more outside of the box of traditional schooling. It would be nice to hear that they will work closely with neighboring charter and district public schools to both disseminate aspects of their model and learn from these other entities.

Reader's Score: **0**

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/24/2010 06:27 PM

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 08/17/2010 12:26 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Achievement First, Inc. -- , (U282M100002)

Reader #3: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Eligible Applicant		
1. Eligible Applicant	50	48
Contribution assisting disadvantaged		
1. Contribution	15	13
Quality of Project Design		
1. Quality of design	10	10
Quality of the Management Plan		
1. Quality Management Plan	25	22
Overall Comments		
Overall Comments		
1. Overall Comments	0	0
Total	100	93

Technical Review Form

Panel #2 - Panel - 2: 84.282M

Reader #3: *****

Applicant: Achievement First, Inc. -- , (U282M100002)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Eligible Applicant

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Strengths:

The application presented clear evidence of achievement gap closure success. The theory behind concentrating on demonstrated capstone achievement is consistent with the schools focus on improving achievement based on the number of years students attend Achievement first (AF). The applicant used disaggregated data effectively. There was a strong focus on academic accountability by all stakeholders. The applicant directly addressed SPED population and demonstrated success (although the sample size is small). The differentiation between students that are ELL/academically behind and those who have specific learning difference (pg 26) is especially impressive. The full inclusion strategy might be problematic if it were used as a reason for withholding needed supports and teaching difference; however, that doesn't seem to be what's happening here. Evidence is the high overall academic achievement inclusive of SPED designated and undesignated students.

Weaknesses:

AF's score would be strengthened by higher matriculation of ELL students and a clear demonstration of their success. AF plans to address these areas but has not proven track record yet.

Reader's Score: 48

Selection Criteria - Contribution assisting disadvantaged

1. The contribution the proposed project will make in assisting educationally disadvantaged students served by the applicant to meet or exceed State academic content standards and State student academic

achievement standards, and to graduate college- and career-ready.

Strengths:

Successful implementation of this project will more than double the number of AF educationally disadvantaged students closing the achievement gap in RI, NY and CT, more than a similar investment in a variety of other charter and non-charter strategies would achieve. This highly structured innovative program is a proven replicable model.

Weaknesses:

The five goals of the program are admirable (pg.31); however, the goals do not anticipate sharing best practices outside of the AF network. This potential grantee has the capacity to share best practices within its network and externally; therefore expanding the impact of the program nationally. However since that was not addressed in the application, leverage of the impact outside of AF with grant resources cannot be factored into potential impact.

Reader's Score: 13

Selection Criteria - Quality of Project Design

1. The Secretary considers the quality of the design of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers--
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 - (ii) The extent to which the design for implementing and evaluating the proposed project will result in information to guide possible replication of project activities or strategies, including information about the effectiveness of the approach or strategies employed by the project.

Strengths:

Goals and measures are relevant and clearly spelled out, including actions to achieve these goals. One can presume the strategies used to replicate successfully to date will be continued.

Weaknesses:

None worth noting.

Reader's Score: 10

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan

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 - (iii) A multi-year financial and operating model for the organization, as well as a demonstrated commitment of current and future partners, and evidence of broad support from stakeholders critical to the project's long-term success.
 - (iv) A plan for closing charter schools supported, overseen, or managed by the applicant that do not meet high standards of quality.

(v) The qualifications, including relevant training and experience, of the project director, CEO/organization leader, and key project personnel, especially in managing projects of the size and scope of the proposed project.

Strengths:

The candidate clearly articulates which positions will be responsible for each major action/decision area. It also includes: a solid articulation of other funding sources to be tapped a particularly strong description of financial and operational controls and safeguards; a realistic sustainability plan; and talented, experienced team members.

Weaknesses:

The application included an insufficient description of plan to close schools that do not meet high standards. However, recognition of underperforming schools (in relationship to AF's high objectives, not state or district comparisons) is evident and commitment to turn around is shown.

Reader's Score: 22

Overall Comments - Overall Comments

- 1. Please provide a summary of comments for this application. There are no points awarded in this section. Please enter 0 for the minimum and maximum scores.**

General:

Achievement First is one of the most inspiring and successful charter school programs in the country. The grant application has some small gaps in the production of data that is required to adequately articulate how great these schools are; nevertheless, Achievement First is absolutely worthy of replication as widely as possible!

Reader's Score: 0

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/17/2010 12:26 PM