



Race to the Top - District

Technical Review Form

Application #0311TX-1 for Comal Independent School District

A. Vision (40 total points)

	Available	Score
(A)(1) Articulating a comprehensive and coherent reform vision (10 points)	10	8
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The LEA proposes raising the graduation rates and college- and career-readiness of their growing numbers of economically disadvantaged and limited English proficient (LEP) students by increasing student engagement through a seven-prong plan consisting of: (1) Increasing student excitement and enthusiasm to complete high school by creating a dynamic and flexible Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) for each student that aligns their educational goals with their college and career aspirations; (2) Implementing “embedded” professional development for teachers on identified campuses via the use of 21st Century Learning Coaches who will model teaching techniques and practices, including differentiated instructional practices, in the teachers' own classrooms and with the teachers' own students; (3) Supplementing the State of Texas assessment system to include easily accessible and useful student growth and success data that teachers can easily utilize to inform instruction; (4) Creating an educator incentive program (to include teachers and principals) that aims to recruit, develop, reward, and helping retain effective teachers and principals; (5) Increasing access to technology for all students on identified campuses so that students and staff members have one-to-one access to technology and the Internet throughout the school day; (6) Increase parental and community involvement on campuses by creating the STAPLES Parent and Community Involvement program; and (7) Target the lowest-achieving school campuses first.</p> <p>All of the above center around raising student graduation rates and college and career preparation (as measured on state tests and district assessments). After the LEA determined that “many students drop out of school because they don’t understand how their current courses will lead to their preferred career choice,” the LEA focused on increasing student engagement through the development of personalized learning plans (PLPs) which will provide each student with a customizable path to completing core requirements in a manner that is centered on each student’s specific career interests and goals.</p> <p>Overall, the proposal articulates a clear and credible approach to the goals of accelerating student achievement, deepening student learning, and increasing equity through personalized student support grounded in tasks that are based on individual academic interests. While all of the proposed reforms center around this central goal, the reforms are varied and there should be clearer articulation of how the different reform measures will be coordinated with each other, and of how they will work together to meet the central goal.</p>		
(A)(2) Applicant’s approach to implementation (10 points)	10	10
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The LEA used a quantitative algorithm to target the subject areas (ELA, math, science, and social studies), population subgroups, grade levels, and campuses, and analyzed according to different levels of passing rates. It was able to use this data to pinpoint the areas of highest need at the secondary schools in the consortium’s districts. The LEA lists participating middle and high schools throughout the consortium. The LEA lists the students at each school, sub-aggregating them in “low income” and “high need” categories. 		

The LEA's approach to implementing its reform is likely to support high-quality LEA-level and school-level implementation of the proposal.

(A)(3) LEA-wide reform & change (10 points)

10

8

(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:

This section describes the “prongs” of the LEA’s proposal in more depth, but doesn’t fully explain how the reform proposal will be scaled up and translated into meaningful reform to support district-wide change beyond the participating schools. The detail in the applicant’s “prongs” fully explains how the applicant will reach its goals, and it articulates its theory of developing a multi-pronged approach based on student engagement, career exploration, teacher preparation and feedback, technology for multi-modal instruction and data tracking, and increased community involvement.

(A)(4) LEA-wide goals for improved student outcomes (10 points)

10

10

(A)(4) Reviewer Comments:

- a) The applicant provides clear LEA-wide goals for raising performance on summative assessments.
- b) The applicant provides clear LEA-wide goals for decreasing achievement gaps through increasing student access and engagement.
- c) The applicant provides clear LEA-wide goals for increasing student graduation rates.
- d) The applicant provides clear LEA-wide goals for increasing college enrollment.

*The applicant explained that 2011-2012 data has not yet been released by the state, and that it will be added into the proposal once that data is available.

The applicant's vision is likely to result in improved student learning and performance. It has set ambitious yet achievable goals for performance increases, and it has an ambitious plan to meet them by increasing personalization and engagement for students.

B. Prior Record of Success and Conditions for Reform (45 total points)

	Available	Score
(B)(1) Demonstrating a clear track record of success (15 points)	15	11

(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:

a) The three districts that make up the LEA demonstrated a track record of improving student learning outcomes for all students by showing growth on state test scores over the past five years (from school year 2007 to school year 2011) in all core areas between groups and subgroups. The districts have been able to close the achievement gap in ELA between Caucasians (i.e., White) and: African-Americans by 25.3%; Hispanics by 7.3%; and Economically Disadvantaged students by 5.3%. During this same time period, GEC district have been able to close the achievement gap in mathematics between Caucasians (i.e., White) and: African-American by 27.0%; Hispanics by 11.0%; Economically Disadvantaged students 15.3%. They have made these gains even though the tests have become more rigorous.

They have also made great strides in increasing the percentage of students who are graduating on schedule; they have concurrently decreased the dropout rate.

b) As noted above, the districts in the LEA have raised scores most dramatically among students in persistently lower-performing subgroups.

c) While the LEA described the districts’ increased uses of students’ performance data in order to direct additional resources to campuses and subject areas that were considered low-performing, it didn’t describe how data would be made available to parents in ways that would help them improve the instruction their children were receiving. It was also a

concern that the data systems were not integrated (even though this was part of the proposal) and therefore the schools in the LEA were limited in terms of how they could use data to inform participation, instruction, and services.

(B)(2) Increasing transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments (5 points)	5	5
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(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:
 One of the constituents of the LEA won the state’s “gold” award for its efforts at financial transparency. The LEA is following its lead in providing a user-friendly website with full budget information. In addition, the information required in criteria a-d is linked to the state education agency’s website, where it is fully accessible to the public. The LEA is demonstrating a high level of transparency by making its data accessible at several times, in several places, and in several formats.

(B)(3) State context for implementation (10 points)	10	10
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(B)(3) Reviewer Comments:
 The LEA meets stringent state accreditation and authorization measures. Within these structures, the Board of Trustees and Superintendent of each district each have the authority to customize goals to meet the needs of their districts. All the districts have signed a Memorandum of Understanding and Letters of support establishing the common goal of creating a personalized learning environment as a key performance measure. Due to these factors, the LEA has demonstrated evidence of both meeting successful conditions and maintaining sufficient autonomy under its state's requirements. It's proposal has a strong focus on personalizing learning environments within these regulatory contexts.

(B)(4) Stakeholder engagement and support (10 points)	10	7
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(B)(4) Reviewer Comments:
 Representatives from each school district met to plan ways to focus on needed activities such as: (1) providing effective personalized learning environments that engage 21st century learners; (2) enhancing existing community partnerships, including parents; and (3) maximizing community and business stakeholder involvement. Then the planning team included educators and community members from each constituency of the LEA consortium.

a) The districts then hosted strategic planning sessions with district teachers, parents, and community members, and families to address specific goals and initiatives. They then created subgroups and interest groups around areas of interest and expertise. Parent/Community Liaisons also met with the campuses’ parent resource specialists to solicit input. In addition, the district also sought out student input on practices that contributed to their learning and on the effectiveness of their teachers. Letters from numerous stakeholders were provided in the appendix.

a ii) Teachers within this LEA do not have collective bargaining representation. Opportunities were provided to individual teachers for anonymous survey inputs, as well as face-to-face discussions.

All teachers and professional staff at all of the participating campuses were provided information on the project by utilizing a variety of methods, including: (1) a brief written summary provided to all teachers and staff; (2) informational meetings held at each participating campus; (3) informational meetings held at the central administrative offices to discuss concerns and questions; and (4) a survey (via secret ballot vote) of teachers to determine whether or not they were in support of the STAPLES Project and of the critical activities it proposed. (Note: The vote results indicated that 82.0% of all teachers were in favor of the STAPLES Project.)

The districts’ efforts to engage a variety of stakeholders was thorough and extensive. But it seemed to provide a lot of breadth, but it did not provide as much depth in its utilization of feedback to influence recommendations and further actions.

Although the LEA indicated that 82% of the teachers voted in favor of the project, it did not provide evidence of their support. This was an important requirement in the application.

(B)(5) Analysis of needs and gaps (5 points)	5	5
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(B)(5) Reviewer Comments:

By aligning the instructional practices in the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) and by creating a data system to effectively utilize STAAR assessment data, the LEA was able to begin to analyze the common gaps and needs among different groups of students in several districts.

The districts further recognized a need to recognize and reward teachers who are identified as effective via the state's TAP teacher assessment system. This led them to find ways to recruit, develop, reward, and retain their most effective teachers in the schools that need them most.

Finally, the LEA was able to identify where the districts needed to invest in training, infrastructure, accessibility, personalization, individualization, and parent and community connections.

All of these efforts demonstrated extensive evidence of having a high-quality plan to analyze current status with respect to implementing personalized learning environments. Moreover, the applicant clearly described its logic for each step of its process.

C. Preparing Students for College and Careers (40 total points)

	Available	Score
(C)(1) Learning (20 points)	20	18

(C)(1) Reviewer Comments:

Through an extensive narrative plus a chart detailing activities, deliverables, timelines and responsible staff for reaching each goal, the applicant articulated a high-quality plan for improving learning and teaching in order to allow all of its middle and high school students to pursue a rigorous and personalized course of study aligned to their state's college- and career-ready standards.

At the heart of the proposal is a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) for each student. In 6th grade, students will begin to study different careers, and in 7th grade, they will complete a semester-long course using Career-Cruising software which has already been piloted with some of the district's technical education students. Students will use this information to identify possible career clusters (with the understanding that their interests will change) and design a personal educational and career exploration that will lead them to their goals. Pathways will be customizable and changeable throughout a student's course of study in the district [a i a ii, a iii]. Students will also have opportunities to participate in "mini-mesters" and symposiums in which they earn credit for studying career skills with a qualified professional or district teacher, with a group of students with similar interests, either before or after school [a i-iv]. Although the applicant had piloted this program with technical education students, the lack of piloting with other groups of high-needs students, at other grade levels, meant that the program hadn't been fully designed or tested with all students in mind.

To facilitate these goals, the district plans to employ 1:1 access to technology via tablets or laptops. This technology will allow for more individualized access to instruction in a greater variety of modalities via podcasts, vodcasts, individualized research, and progress-based learning. The district plans to use this method of delivery to break out of the traditional "sit and get" method of classroom instruction and instead adopt a method that is more individualized, flexible, and adaptable [bi, b ii, b iii]. They then plan to use this method to provide accommodations and increased learning strategies for their high-need students, and to ensure that all students graduate with college and career skills that they view as relevant [v]. The applicant discussed how this broadened curriculum will also provide numerous opportunities to provide access to the diverse cultures, contexts, and perspectives that are already present in the district, as well as those that would give students an increased understanding of the broader world [a iv]. But it didn't go into depth in the latter area about the specific opportunities it would provide.

Students' progress will be assessed through yearly meetings with a Career Counselor, uses of individualized data that can be updated daily and that are monitored at least monthly (or more frequently), and through STAAR assessment data and academic benchmark data from each grading period [b iv A &B]. Mastery of critical skills such as goal setting, teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving would be taught in deepening and student-centered ways from

6th grade through graduation [a v]. The applicant needed to give more detail about how it would build in ongoing parent involvement.

The districts plan to invest heavily in faculty development to help them both learn to use the technology and to make the instructional shift from “sit and get” to facilitating a more adaptable, flexible, and individualized course of study for each student [c].

(C)(2) Teaching and Leading (20 points)

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(C)(2) Reviewer Comments:

The LEA is taking the concept of personalized, goal-driven instruction that it developed for students and extending it to its professional development for teachers. Teachers who are masters of teaching 21st Century learning will be identified through the district's incentive program and given full-time positions to facilitate faculty development. They will then work with other teachers to create a personalized professional development plan. The professional development plan will be measured through student performance data and teacher evaluation data, and will be reviewed and updated every 6 weeks. The personalized professional development plans will allow the teachers to pursue goals related to: (1) supporting the effective implementation of personalized learning environments and strategies that meet each student's academic needs and help ensure all students can graduate on time and be college- and career-ready; (2) adaptive content and instruction, providing opportunities for students to engage in common and individual tasks; (3) frequently measuring student progress toward meeting CCRS and using those data to inform both the acceleration of student progress; (4) effectively utilizing student achievement data to help improve the individual and collective practice of educators; and (5) improving teachers' and principals' practices and their effectiveness by using feedback provided by the TAP system, including frequent feedback on individual and collective effectiveness, as well as providing recommendations, supports, and interventions as needed for improvement [b i, bii, b iii].

In addition, teachers will collaborate in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as they develop their skills together, work toward common goals, and assess student data. PLCs will meet for at least 90 minutes each week. All of these processes will allow the teachers to assess how well each student is following her/his Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) and to find appropriate interventions when needed [a i, a ii, a iii].

Teachers will be assessed and given frequent feedback through a system called TAP, which allows school leaders and teacher leadership teams to identify effective practices, and to take steps to address areas that need work. Educator effectiveness data will be analyzed in conjunction with student performance data and both will be used together to identify ways to improve student performance. PLCs will work on plans to implement identified areas of improvement [c i, cii, b iv].

To ensure that all teachers have access to -- and know how to use -- the tools, data, and resources necessary to accelerate student learning, the LEA will create common processes, practices and procedures that are aligned across all schools in the district. The PLC's, master teachers, and vodcast instructional modules will facilitate this process. They will also have access to technology (tablets or laptops) that provide instructional resources they can use to improve their practices and to share best practices with each other. These same systems will give each teacher access to continuously updated data on each student [b ii, b iii, c].

The LEA plans to increase the number of students who receive instruction from highly effective teachers by 1) giving all teachers increased professional development on uses of technology, individualized instruction, and 21st Century learning; 2) increasing efforts to hire teachers in hard-to-fill positions or to relocate their own Master Teachers to those areas; 3) using the state's TAP system to identify the highly-effective teachers and then pay them to be Master Teachers who disseminate best practices throughout schools in the district; 4) using technology to record and share model lessons and other materials [d].

The description above is a shortened version of the district's extensive and detailed plans to effectively meet all the criteria in this section.

D. LEA Policy and Infrastructure (25 total points)

	Available	Score
(D)(1) LEA practices, policies, rules (15 points)	15	11

(D)(1) Reviewer Comments:

The applicant has articulated a plan to support project implementation through comprehensive policies and infrastructure that provide every student, educator, and level of the education system with the necessary support and resources. Even though it doesn't have all of the required components in place at this time, it has included a detailed plan to address any areas that are lacking during its reform process.

The project will be supervised by the GEC Executive Leadership Team (GELT), which will be comprised of the superintendents from each of the three participating school districts. Their MOU stipulates that each district will get an equal vote. The GELT will also work to provide issues that hamper needed flexibility or other needed measures. The members of the GELT will also support campus teams as they develop personalized learning plans (PLPs) for each student [a&b]. While the MOU provides a general plan for collaboration among the three districts, there wasn't a lot of detail about how they would ensure that the three districts, with their superintendents, principals, and teachers (plus their replacements if the current ones leave) would continue working together over the long term.

Currently, different districts within the LEA do different things to provide leadership and get input within their schools. Some campuses meet monthly for collaborative planning and data review. In other schools, leadership teams participate in campus checkpoint visits and data team meetings where time is set aside to review student progress on curricula standards across grade levels and within identified student groups and subgroups. A key part of the proposal involved standardizing leadership and teacher learning opportunities in a way that would provide structure for growth while also allowing for sufficient flexibility and autonomy [b].

Similarly, while each district has been attempting to incorporate strategies for students to demonstrate mastery learning though basic remediation structures such as (1) credit recovery classes; (2) evening or night school; and (3) summer classes, the proposal would generate more streamlined opportunities for each district to adopt more personalized and adaptable curricula for its students [c, d & e]

Ensuring an interoperable SSPSS reporting system is one of the fundamental aspects of this proposal. But the districts have not been able to put the system in place without the necessary funding [d]. It is unclear how well they were able to determine common needs and goals without such a system in place.

The LEA's proposal would allow its constituent districts to streamline and expand upon their existing initiatives in order to provide learning resources and instructional practices that are more adaptable and fully accessible to all students, including English Language Learners and students with disabilities [e]. The proposal didn't have an in-depth plan to ensure that the districts continued to integrate their processes as they were streamlining.

(D)(2) LEA and school infrastructure (10 points)	10	7
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(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:

The applicant's proposal focuses on providing improved infrastructure for rural and suburban students and their parents to access the information and materials they need to pursue their personalized learning plans both "online" at school and "offline" using open data formats when they are not at school [a, c].

All new data systems will be designed to be interoperable [d].

There is mention of technical support through Information Technology staff, but the applicant does not elaborate on ensuring that students, parents, and other outside stakeholders will have appropriate levels of technical support, and it didn't seem to have a clear plan to have continuing and extensive technical support[b].

E. Continuous Improvement (30 total points)

	Available	Score
(E)(1) Continuous improvement process (15 points)	15	12
<p>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The LEA will contract with an outside Project Evaluator who will provide objective and continuous feedback. It plans to use objective performance measures that are clearly related to student outcomes. These measures will be designed to be disaggregated by each student's teacher, principal, student subgroup, level of intervention, and teacher's fidelity of implementation so that the districts can pinpoint what is effective in terms of student performance. In addition to the quantitative data described above, the Project Evaluator plans to use qualitative data to assess actual implementation and performance practices. The Project Evaluator will present a monthly report to a management team comprised of the district superintendents, principals, and selected teachers. The monthly reports will be compiled into quarterly, and then semi-annual reports.</p> <p>All staff and faculty will participate in an annual Project Review. In addition, internal stakeholders will be able to provide continuous feedback to the project by sending recommendations, complaints or compliments to the project's email address or by posting comments on the project's website. Internal stakeholders will also be asked to complete anonymous surveys to allow them to communicate directly with the Project Evaluator, who can then aggregate the comments and report them to the SMT.</p> <p>All of this data from the year will be compiled into an Annual Performance Report that will inform planning and goal adjustments in future years.</p> <p>As demonstrated above, the applicant has provided numerous and thorough methods for implementing a rigorous continuous improvement process that provides feedback at regular intervals, which allows for timely corrections and improvements toward progress goals, during and after the term of the grant. Most of the plans for continuous improvement involved the districts' assessments of principals, teachers, and students, but there wasn't much information about how feedback from teachers and students would continuously be used in the feedback process, beyond the more formal surveys and reviews</p>		
(E)(2) Ongoing communication and engagement (5 points)	5	4
<p>(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The LEA's Project Evaluator will generate an Annual Review that will be shared with the general public.</p> <p>Ongoing communication and engagement will occur through disseminating non-confidential information through (1) the projects website, (2) email communication; (3) social media outlets [e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.]; (4) campus meetings; (5) parent meetings; and/or (6) teacher meetings.</p> <p>There wasn't as much information about how teachers and students would be an integral part of the feedback process.</p>		
(E)(3) Performance measures (5 points)	5	5
<p>(E)(3) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The LEA provides multiple valid performance measures. For each one, it provides a) a detailed rationale, b) explanation of how the measure will provide rigorous and timely information that will inform assessment of its proposed plan, and c) how it will review and improve the measure over time.</p>		
(E)(4) Evaluating effectiveness of investments (5 points)	5	5
<p>(E)(4) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The LEA plans to hire an independent Project Evaluator who "will be contracted to conduct rigorous, ongoing evaluations that is disaggregated by district, campus, grade, subject, and by student subgroups." The LEA envisions the project as a quasi-experimental study utilizing clustered regression discontinuity methods, with the results of the reform evaluated by</p>		

an independent party. Annual Evaluation Reports also will include a return-on-investment (ROI) analysis to measure the economic cost and return for each program intervention.

As demonstrated, the LEA has detailed plans to evaluate the effectiveness of RTTT investments and to alter its uses of resources if an aspect of its proposal is found to be ineffective.

F. Budget and Sustainability (20 total points)

	Available	Score
(F)(1) Budget for the project (10 points)	10	6
<p>(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>a. The only funds that are identified to support the project are RTTT funds. Grant funds are included in the budget, but their sources aren't clearly articulated, nor is their application or duration.</p> <p>b. Most of the funds are reasonable. But the district included costs such as copy costs, which would be part of most districts' normal operating budgets. It also wasn't clear why producing podcasts would cost approximately \$1400 apiece. It should be possible to create a podcast or vodcast on any camera and mic-enabled laptop either for free or with fairly inexpensive software and hardware costs.</p> <p>It is also unrealistic to list technology as a one-time procurement. Inevitably, it needs tech support, and some items break and need to be replaced.</p> <p>Funding for ongoing technical support at each site, and for upkeep and replacement of hardware and software is essential.</p> <p>c. Investments and priorities are detailed in both narrative and table form [c i]. The applicant details which will be used for one-time investments vs. which will be used for ongoing operational costs [c ii].</p>		
(F)(2) Sustainability of project goals (10 points)	10	6
<p>(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The applicant plans to maintain sustainability by having an outside evaluator assess which programs are truly effective, and by using their initial investments to build institutional capacity that will pay off in future years. They also plan to use the Push In/ Phase Out (Barrington) model to use their initial expenditures to create future capital: for example, once teachers are trained, they can train new teachers at a far lower cost. The LEA then plans to secure additional funding or build on existing funding sources, with the goal of increasing additional funding by 50% each year. Since these additional funding sources are not secure at the present time, this leaves some doubt about sustainability if future funding is needed.</p> <p>While the above provides evidence of initial planning, some of these plans seem optimistic. Additional funding had not yet been secured. Even with a Push In/ Phase Out model, new teachers will need to be trained and continuing teachers will need additional training as technologies, software, or conditions change. More importantly, technology isn't self-sustaining: it requires ongoing technical support at each site, and equipment will inevitably need to be replaced or updated.</p>		

Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)

	Available	Score
Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)	10	5
Competitive Preference Priority Reviewer Comments:		

The LEA described plans to “expand a Parent and Community Involvement Program (PCI), in collaboration with local area nonprofits and local businesses.” It focused on a plan to provide student and family supports that focused on a subset of its needs. To this end, it proposed working with a local non-profit called *Communities in Schools* to develop family-related elements such as (1) Family well-being; (2) Positive parent-child relationships; (3) Families as lifelong educators; (4) Families as Learners; (5) Family engagement in transitions; (6) Family connections to peers and community; and (7) Families as advocates and leaders. The LEA intends to meet those goals by hiring “Parent and Community” liaisons and by putting a campus parent center at each school, which would activities on parenting, educational support, GED, & ESL classes, and educational and medical services. In this process, they hope to “develop families into lifelong educators” [1, 2 & 4].

Apart from a statement that the program will be assessed by an outside evaluator, there isn’t a description of how the LEA would track selected indicators, or use the data to target resources to improve students’ performance, develop a strategy to scale the model beyond participating students, or improve results over time [3 a –d].

The applicant had clear goals and a clear timeline for implementation. It had two performance measures related to increasing students’ attendance and raising familys' awareness of social services, but it seems like raising awareness isn’t a complete end in itself. There are not clear plans to assess the needs and assets of participating students [5 a, 6]. Identification and inventories of the needs and assets of the school and community, and of engaging parents and families, are reflected in the proposal, but there is no articulation of a continued process for doing this [5 b, 5 d]. The LEA proposes that the program be evaluatedby an objective, outside evaluation service [5 c, 5 e].

While the partnership with *Communities in Schools* already exists, the LEA has not yet hired liaisons or established campus community centers, nor has it established funds to do so.

Overall, it the plan is ambitious and it has clear goals, but the details for funding and implementing it aren’t fully articulated.

Absolute Priority 1

	Available	Score
Absolute Priority 1	Met/Not Met	Met

Absolute Priority 1 Reviewer Comments:

The applicant comprehensively addresses Absolute Priority 1. The entire proposal centers around restructuring instructional methods, using assessment data, using technology, and strengthening communication as methods for building and assessing more personalized learning environments.

Total	210	173
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Race to the Top - District

Technical Review Form

Application #0311TX-2 for Comal Independent School District

A. Vision (40 total points)

	Available	Score
(A)(1) Articulating a comprehensive and coherent reform vision (10 points)	10	4
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The three independent school districts of the Guada-Coma Education Consortium (GEC) have worked together successfully in the past to meet needs of particular populations and want to address the academic success challenges faced by increasing numbers of low-income and high-need students. The applicant presents a basic but unevenly connected vision for this initiative (STAPLES -- Systematic and Targeted Use of Assessments and Practices to Leverage Engagement of Students) that is anchored in personally engaging students to create student "excitement and enthusiasm" in order to "accelerate student achievement."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The GEC identifies the core educational assurance areas as essential elements, but does not respond to how the initiative builds on work done on college and career ready standards, or on turning around schools. • Applicant presents seven-pronged approach as designed to allow students to experience "accelerated student achievement, broadened and deepened student learning and increased equity..." but does not provide the vision of how the components work together to achieve the project's goals, other than saying that, "by design," the components will result in the desired outcomes. 		
(A)(2) Applicant's approach to implementation (10 points)	10	7
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The GEC Consortium provides a good description of the approach to start implementation of the project (STAPLES), which will engage students starting in 6th grade. The initiative will include slightly less than half of the current population of students in the Consortium. Based on current projections, the overall population of low-income students is expected to increase.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The GEC used a systematic approach to analyze student, school, and educator data in order to identify and select the participating students, schools campuses, teachers and other involved educators. The districts' analysis for selecting students and schools adequately allows for targeting the population overall and for beginning with the students and schools with highest need. • The application provides an appropriate and detailed listing of the 16 participating schools serving students in grades 6 through 12, and the numbers of low-income students (6755), high-needs students (5488) and educators (1,041). • The participating low-income student population that comprises 40% of the participating schools' population meets the competition requirement. <p>The basics are largely well described, and the seven components of the initiative are detailed in various parts of the proposal. The bigger picture process of engagement -- that is, beyond selecting the students, schools and educators -- is not.</p>		
(A)(3) LEA-wide reform & change (10 points)	10	4
<p>(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The GEC Consortium offers a limited and confusing plan for scaling up components of the STAPLES initiative to engage all participating students and schools, extending beyond the first students and schools that will participate. While the application does not specifically note that all low-income students in the relevant grade bands in the Consortium will be participating students, a demographic informational chart provided by the Consortium records that they are.</p> <p>The STAPLES initiative plans "to target the lowest-achieving school campuses first," and the Consortium identifies that order for the first few. This plan to start with campuses whose students have the greatest needs is consistent with the Consortium's rationale for making personalized learning part of the infrastructure and culture of the LEAs, especially in light of the expected growth in student needs. The Consortium does not detail how the potential sequencing of school</p>		

participation fits with the timing and rollout of the STAPLES initiative to all identified participating students and school campuses overall and with respect to each component of the initiative.

The Consortium calls and describes the plan for each component of the STAPLES initiative as a "Project Plan" and that is how they come across -- separate projects and plans that have important links to each other but lack clarity on how they improve student outcomes collectively .

The Consortium's application does not uniformly meet the competition requirement for a high-quality plan for LEA-wide reform and change. The GEC describes each of the seven components of the STAPLES initiative separately. Each contains elements required in a high-quality plan, some more complete and comprehensive than others.

The Consortium presents uneven plans with questionable timeframes to ensure the design, development, approval and operation of a number of new and complex, supplemental or upgraded systems before the next school year, that include a web-based college and career application system, an educator rating system, an educator incentive plan, a data warehouse to supplement the Texas student data system, and technology infrastructure improvements in the LEAs.

The Consortium submits that the professional development component, using 21st Century Learning Coaches and creating some 1,800 podcasts of effective practices that educators can access, will build institutional capacity that will help sustain the project component post-grant, in large part because of upfront one-time development expense and anticipated inexpensive maintenance going forward. The process and timeframe for podcast development, rollout, assessment, and the need for refreshing and improvement are not addressed.

The Consortium does note important recognition that effective practices must be identified and documented in an ongoing and consistent fashion to create meaningful reform at full scale. The Consortium plans to contract with an independent Project Evaluator to carry out evaluation, but does not define the scope and plan that will help inform the selection of this important resource.

(A)(4) LEA-wide goals for improved student outcomes (10 points)	10	4
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(A)(4) Reviewer Comments:

The initiative contains an array of goals and indicators to document progress and improvement, including improved student performance as measured by State and other assessments, effective teaching, and advancement toward on-time graduation. Improvements in student learning and performance is likely, but the stated goals and indicators provide insufficient detail and documentation to conclude that the vision will result in the scale of improvements projected.

The GEC Consortium meets the competition requirement and provides the most recent baseline data available (for school year 2010-2011). Much remains unknown, however, since Texas is in the process of changing assessments for middle and high school students and increasing its standards for attaining proficiency in each of the next few years, and, as a result, has not has not yet made available to LEAs the 2011-12 data. The GEC indicates that it would provide updated baseline data and goal projections when new State data become available.

The STAPLES initiative describes broad goals of achieving for each year by school, grade, and subgroup, a 10% increase in number and percentage of participating students, grades 6-8, achieving proficiency on the State exams in English and Mathematics, a 10% increase in high school students on end-of-course exams, and 15% annual increase for those taking Algebra II. The year over year projections have most schools, grades and subgroups all showing sizeable growth patterns achieving near or full 100% proficiency by 2015-16. While the State is changing measures and targets, some information (e.g., increasing proficiency benchmarks) is known. The GEC does not address the initiative's goal projections in comparison to what is already known and planned by the State.

The Consortium offers evidence demonstrating improvements in student test scores, graduation rates and reducing dropout rates over the last four years but not at the level projected year over year for this initiative. Given the detail provided, the range of baseline starting points by subgroup and school, the Consortium's anticipated growth in low-income and high-needs populations, and the State's already slated proficiency standard increase, make achieving some of the assessment goals in the described timeframes unrealistic.

The GEC provides achievement gap baseline data and project goals for each LEA, by grade, subgroup/comparison group, and school year through 2015-16. It does not address whether the State has specific targets and how goal projections line up against those that do exist.

The charted goals and timeframes for increasing graduation rates are more realistic for some schools and subgroups than others and will depend on the 2011-12 rates, unavailable in this application. Application data do not explain or otherwise make it clear the different improvement trajectories for graduation rates that look similar for the lowest achieving subgroups across LEAs.

College enrollment dipped from 2010-11 to 2011-12. Why this happened and how this affects goal setting and attainment going forward also are not addressed.

B. Prior Record of Success and Conditions for Reform (45 total points)

	Available	Score
(B)(1) Demonstrating a clear track record of success (15 points)	15	9

(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium and each of its LEA partners provide a good record of success overall and a modest record in advancing student learning and achievement in the targeted populations.

- The Consortium documents that its districts raised student achievement scores in all core academic areas for all students and subgroups from 2007-2011. State assessment results in the areas that evaluate college and career-readiness over the four-year period show a overall percentage improvement of 18.5% in English Language Arts (ELA) and a 16.7% increase in Math, and a range from 27% in Math and 24% in ELA for African American students to 2% in Math and 5.3% in ELA for "economically disadvantaged" subgroup. The GEC notes, "this is not simply incremental improvement over years." Because the Consortium used the State College and Career Readiness indicators, which require higher scores, "the districts comprising the GEC have been able to improve student achievement, even when using the most rigorous standard, for all groups and subgroups."
- Over the same four-year period and using the same indicators, the GEC reports closing the achievement gaps between White and other groups of students: In Math by 25.3% for African Americans, 7.3% for Hispanics, and 5.3% for Economically Disadvantaged; in ELA by 27% for African Americans, 11% for Hispanics and 15.3% for Economically Disadvantaged students.
- The GEC also charts improvements for all students and subgroups in graduation rates and reducing school district dropout rates over the same period.

The GEC also describes unique efforts undertaken by individual districts that have improved student achievement in specific schools and with student subgroups. The Comal Independent School District has "utilized student growth data in order to direct additional resources to campuses and subject areas that were considered low-performing. The New Braunfels Independent School District has implemented a "Pre-AP" program for all students in grades 6-8.

It is unclear to what extent student performance data to this point have been available to and usable by students, educators, and parents in ways that inform and improve participation, instruction, and services. The Consortium notes that each district has data systems it uses to track student achievement, but they are limited in what they can do within and across LEAs. One of the objectives of the STAPLES project is to expand capacity by creating supplemental interoperable systems that will increase transparent and useful data, and the LEA and Consortium capacity to engage students, educators and parents in improving student learning and achievement.

(B)(2) Increasing transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments (5 points)	5	4
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(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium provides a high level of transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments.

Each of the LEAs in the Consortium links financial data to the Texas Education Agency's website that provides wide access to an array of financial information including salaries (for instructional, administrative and support staff); instruction, instruction-related activities, instructional leadership, school leadership, student support, and other campus costs. Expense data also are posted on individual programs (e.g., regular education, special education, bilingual/ESL education, career and technical education, athletics and related activities). GEC notes that the "online reports are provided at the individual campus level and include comparisons to the other campuses, via the campus group report, as [comparison] to State of Texas expenses."

The GEC affirms that it has a transparent system that provides school-level expenditures from State and local funds for (a) actual personnel salaries based on the US. Census Bureau's classification; (2) actual personnel salaries for instructional staff only; (3) actual personnel salary for teachers only; and (4) actual non-personnel expenditures. The GEC does not provide separate information in each of those categories as part of the application.

The lead LEA and fiscal agent for the STAPLES initiative, the Comal Independent School District, received the highest level "Gold" recognition for its financial transparency efforts, from the Texas Comptroller Leadership Circle program that spotlights local governments and agencies with high transparency standards and practices.

(B)(3) State context for implementation (10 points)	10	8
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(B)(3) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium -- with the Comal Independent School District as lead LEA and formal agreements signed by the Consortium's partnering LEAs -- demonstrates successful conditions and the autonomy under State law and other requirements to implement the STAPLES initiative.

Each of the GEC Consortium LEAs is an independent school district authorized under the Texas Education Code and accredited by the Texas Education agency. An elected Board of Trustees governs each independent school district in Texas, hires and supervises the district superintendent, and ensures "that the superintendent is accountable for achieving performance goals." The 3 district superintendents and the respective Boards of Trustees approved the STAPLES application and signed appropriate MOUs and letters of support that are included with the application.

While the application does not provide robust support for all the projected outcomes, because the GEC designed the STAPLES initiative around Texas College and Career Readiness Standards approved by the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Consortium has good reason for confidence that the initiative will garner the support of relevant agencies to achieve effective personalized learning environments that will ensure that more students become college and career ready.

(B)(4) Stakeholder engagement and support (10 points)	10	5
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(B)(4) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium reports on multiple activities to engage various stakeholders (students, families, teachers, principals, and business and community leaders and organizations), but does not present a systematic approach to broaden outreach.

The Consortium notes that "representatives from each school district and community were singularly represented on the GEC," but it is unclear what groups were represented and whether that representation was part of the GEC Planning Team (consisting of a core group of educators, community partners and a larger cohort of flexible partners who participated based on their role in the community) or part of some other group to provide input..

While a mix of student input was sought, through student strategic planning panels that met with teachers, parents and community members to discuss classroom goals and initiatives, as well as inquiries of students about practices that met their needs and teacher effectiveness, the application does not report the breadth of the student representation or solicitation. The GEC held special meetings designed to answer questions and garner support from parents and families. The Consortium reports that the special parent meetings and discussions with the schools' parent resource specialists resulted in receiving input and recommendations from parents and families, including support for increasing the number of Parent/Community Liaisons.

The LEAs in the Consortium do not have collective bargaining representation. The GEC Planning Team sought teacher and principal input through Executive leadership teams from each district, focused teacher meetings, and an anonymous teacher survey. The Consortium reports the survey showed that 82% of all teachers favored the STAPLES initiative. The survey and results are noted in the narrative but the application does not contain any supporting documentation. The application includes letters of support for the STAPLES initiative from Consortium members, local businesses, academic and community support organizations, local government representatives, a kindergarten teacher, as well as parent groups and individual parents.

(B)(5) Analysis of needs and gaps (5 points)

5

2

(B)(5) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium does not provide a high-quality plan to assess its status in implementing personalized learning environments. The Consortium refers to "several comprehensive needs assessments" that documented current status and identified needs and gaps, and highlights those needs. The application does not specify the previous needs assessments and no current assessment is provided.

The Consortium identifies current problems in the core areas, based on the Consortium and LEAs' experiences, points to the development of the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards and the new State assessment in providing critical tools to measure readiness and gather relevant and reliable student data, explains the STAPLES initiative, and reasserts the ability of the initiative to address the problems and improve student achievement.

C. Preparing Students for College and Careers (40 total points)

	Available	Score
(C)(1) Learning (20 points)	20	17

(C)(1) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium presents a high-quality plan to improve learning and provide the supports that engage and empowers students, in particular high-needs students, to graduate college- and career-ready. The Consortium details an approach with clearly stated goals and activities related to enhancing student learning and improving college and career readiness. The goals focus on motivating students to become connected to and involved in structuring their own learning pathways based on high standards. The initiative consistently links its goals, development, and instructional focus to the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards.

The STAPLES initiative clearly places students at the center of their own learning, beginning in grade 6 with career exploration and continuing with the development and monitoring of their Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) through high school. The initiative describes how teachers will be prepared and specialized career counselors enlisted to help motivate, instruct, and support students in first identifying their interests, and then creating, using, and adjusting their PLPs to fit changing needs and career interests. The plan explains how educators will use the regular reporting on students in career clusters in order to make appropriate classes and specialized learning opportunities available to meet student interests and needs. The plan also importantly notes that the online PLP, linked to the student database that will be updated frequently, will allow students and educators to determine progress and detect potential problems a student may have in meeting requirements.

The initiative has an appropriate focus on students with the greatest needs and demonstrates that commitment in its plan to begin the initiative with campuses that reflect highest need, and provide technology access and upgrades to those students and schools. The STAPLES Student Progress and Support System (SSPSS), which can alert educators to evidenced-based interventions that could help student stay or get back on track or even accelerate, will include high quality interventions and educational strategies for students who may require some higher level of accommodation.

The initiative provides attractive quality opportunities for students to deepen their learning and earn credit toward graduation by participation in "mini-mesters" (classes up to four weeks long that give students additional experience in their field of academic interest), and special symposia hosted by local area leaders in particular fields. The plan also provides important ongoing support to reinforce and deepen students learning through access to high-quality content online.

The GEC Consortium plan for ensuring access to diverse cultures, contexts and perspectives relies on engagement with the GEC ethnically diverse educators and staff, and adjunct staff from diverse cultures who will be involved in the "mini-mesters" and special symposia. The Consortium does not detail additional efforts other than "professional development assistance in selecting materials and resources."

The Consortium also has a reasonable plan to help students develop essential skills for achievement in school, college and careers (goal-setting, teamwork, perseverance, critical thinking, etc.) . The STAPLES initiative staff will develop age-appropriate instruction "to integrate into the daily lessons of all students." The Texas College and Career Readiness Standards incorporate these skills, as well, and the STAPLES initiative will include them in the initiative's embedded professional development effort.

The initiative will provide useful parent information, but limited parent involvement and engagement. The Consortium will provide participating students and parents with information on the project, Parent/Community Liaisons, hired by the initiative and assigned to each participating campus "will help parents better understand how their child(ren) will complete a PLP." Parents will be kept informed though regular updates via notices and online postings.

(C)(2) Teaching and Leading (20 points)

20

14

(C)(2) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium provides a multi-faceted plan for professional development to strengthen its current and future educator ranks and support effective implementation of personalized learning environments to improve student achievement and college and career readiness. The STAPLES initiative is rooted in personalized learning for students but the Consortium does not consistently make clear the tie to improved student learning within the big picture of professional development concepts and activities. The descriptions of on-the-ground implementation with educators provide useful details that address the important links to student learning.

The application shows the important role of 21st Century Learning Coaches and Master Educators, who will engage the initiative's participating educators in professional development, to increase educator skills and strategies to ensure effective student engagement, instruction and support. The Learning Coaches will "model the concepts and approaches being discussed in the educators' classrooms" with students. They also will help educators assess student progress, utilize student data systems regularly to inform improvements, and adapt and differentiate instruction as students need. Another strong feature of the initiative that bolsters personalized student learning and achievement is the development of participating educators' professional learning communities (PLCs), providing opportunities for team reviews of student data and progress, development of specialized interventions as indicated, and common planning for further improvements.

The initiative's professional development plan to create common practices and procedures aligned across grades, schools, feeder patterns and LEAs further demonstrates strengthening the capacity of educators and the LEAs to respond consistently to individual student needs and support improved learning as students move to higher grades and new schools in the Consortium.

The Consortium describes additional strategies that help strengthen educator content knowledge and teaching skills, including the development and use of podcasts (from an online library) that show how educators effectively implement particular evidence-based approaches and interventions.

The Consortium's plan to increase the number of students who receive instruction from highly effective teachers does not address all elements required in a high quality plan, including timelines for expanding reach of the Master Educator program through relocation, special recruitment and financial incentives.

Most of the initiative relies on online access and information -- from the student data systems (State and STAPLES supplemental data systems to regularly inform student progress) and student Personalized Learning Plans to educator professional development materials and tools -- that students and educators must learn to use. The STAPLES initiative will provide training and support to students and educators, but does not address digital divides and related problems that still exist in using online resources. Populations that have not had access to or a lot of experience with new technologies often face additional barrier to success because of those circumstances.

The Consortium has an appropriate State approved educator evaluation plan along with other measures (21st Century Learning Coaches) to assess educator performance that will provide regular feedback to teachers and principals.

D. LEA Policy and Infrastructure (25 total points)

	Available	Score
(D)(1) LEA practices, policies, rules (15 points)	15	15
(D)(1) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>The STAPLES initiative has clear central office governance structure and support. The Comal Independent School District is the lead LEA and fiscal agent for the initiative. The top leadership from the partnering LEAs-- the three superintendents -- comprise the GEC leadership team (GELT) that will supervise the initiative. The GELT will review "policies and procedures that may be hampering" implementation of the project.</p> <p>Each LEA and its Board of Trustees have approved and agreed to the initiative, with MOUs submitted that confirm the partnership. The three school districts are equal partners in decision making for the initiative. The STAPLES Project Management Team is charged with supporting the GELT in providing support and services to all participating schools, including help in evaluating and coordinating the needed resources to successfully implement the student Personalized Learning Plan system.</p> <p>The Consortium describes a number of existing tested and appealing strategies (flexible scheduling in and outside of school, credit recovery efforts, credit assignment for demonstrated mastery, student access to "virtual classrooms" and dual credit programs), as well as efforts to be initiated in the STAPLES project that, if expanded (e.g., "mini-mesters"; 21st Century Learning resources for students at all levels), would attract and reach more students and help improve their learning and educational outcomes. The Consortium submits several letters offering "in-kind" assistance (symposium speakers, career exploration site visits, dual credit opportunities).</p>		
(D)(2) LEA and school infrastructure (10 points)	10	3
(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:		

The GEC Consortium demonstrates intention to ensure, regardless of income, that all participating students, educators, and stakeholders, as appropriate, have access to necessary content, tools, and other learning resources to support project implementation.

21st Century Learning Coaches and participating educators will work together to develop "offline" storage and capacity to facilitate access during non-school hours. The Learning Coaches will provide instruction and technical support to educators. Educators (mainly classroom teachers and career counselors) will be working with students, although it is unclear in what ways with respect to technical support. It is also unclear who will assist parents with such support.

The Consortium recognizes that creating an "offline" approach means using open data formats and lists a range of options, but does not indicate that one or more will be tested or used, or the process for making that determination.

The GEC Consortium states its plan to create interoperable data systems for the students' Personalized Learning Plan data system, the educator evaluation data system and for the STAPLES Student Progress Support System, the three key systems in the initiative that will need to work together to assess status and progress in student learning, and teacher effectiveness, and to inform improvements. The Consortium does not elaborate on how that will occur.

E. Continuous Improvement (30 total points)

	Available	Score
(E)(1) Continuous improvement process (15 points)	15	5
<p>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The GEC Consortium will contract with an external Project Evaluator for this initiative, but the scope of the evaluation and the role of the evaluator in working with the Consortium are not described beyond collecting "data on a continuous basis," the identification of a several basic indicators, and the need for quantitative and qualitative evaluation.</p> <p>The Consortium provides insufficient description of the STAPLES Project's Continuous Improvement Plan. The plan is based on assessment of a variety of performance measures that include student performance, educator effectiveness, and project processes. Fourteen proposed measures are identified. The application notes that measures will be reviewed and revised if they are inadequate.</p> <p>The Consortium explains the process of how information will be compiled, shared, and reported in a timely fashion to make program changes, and published broadly. The Project Evaluator will review the data and make recommendations to the STAPLES Management Team, which in turn will make program modifications as necessary. The process allows for timely feedback, but there is not enough information to evaluate rigor. The description does not discuss what meeting or not meeting the benchmarks means for program change and continuous improvement.</p>		
(E)(2) Ongoing communication and engagement (5 points)	5	2
<p>(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The GEC Consortium does not present a formal communication strategy. The Consortium indicates that it will base the communication strategy on its Continuous Improvement Plan that describes process and timing.</p> <p>The Consortium here presents a chain of communication events: They begin internally with sharing information with teachers, principals and other internal project resource persons. The Consortium subsequently will post data and reports on the STAPLES website, and information will be disseminated in a variety of ways -- via e-mail, social media, meeting at schools, teacher meetings, parent meetings. The GEC also will provide access to approved reports to external stakeholders. The Consortium will seek feedback directly and through anonymous surveys. The GEC does not identify responsible GEC/LEA staff.</p>		
(E)(3) Performance measures (5 points)	5	4

(E)(3) Reviewer Comments:

The STAPLES initiative focuses on improving student achievement and ensuring college and career readiness for all students, and especially for economically disadvantaged and high-needs students in middle and high school. The GEC Consortium specifies 14 relevant applicant-proposed measures based on the STAPLES Project's goals.

The measures cover the several required areas and others, including student proficiency in English and Math, on time graduation, student acquisition of important social and organizational skills, student access to effective educators, the use of data and technology to develop interventions and track progress, and personnel and institutional capacity building. As the competition requires, assessment data will be disaggregated by subgroup, grade, and school (except for the proposed measure to assess the goal of increasing the numbers of teacher and principals who use the student data system to design effective interventions for students).

The Consortium provides an appropriate rationale for each measure. The Consortium also adequately specifies the type of data to be collected, timing of data collection, as well as an outline of a plan to track each measure, review it and improve it over time. The Consortium notes that the measures are subject to change depending on the sufficiency of the data that can be collected. The external project evaluator is charged with proposing alternative measures, as necessary. The Consortium's discussion of how the measure will provide rigorous, timely, and formative leading information varies by measure.

The quality that these assessments provide overall depend on the overall evaluation, which has insufficient detail.

(E)(4) Evaluating effectiveness of investments (5 points)	5	1
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(E)(4) Reviewer Comments:

The GEC Consortium describes the evaluation that the external Project Evaluator will conduct as "a rigorous, quasi-experimental study" and specifies the analysis methods that will be employed. The Consortium indicates that "Annual Evaluation Reports will include a return-on-investment analysis to measure the economic cost and return for each 'STAPLES' intervention," but does not explain how that responds to the broad issue of effective investments in support of personalized student learning.

F. Budget and Sustainability (20 total points)

	Available	Score
(F)(1) Budget for the project (10 points)	10	3
<p>(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The STAPLES initiative budget provides a big picture for the project overall and for each component to build capacity in the LEAs and Consortium that the GEC hopes to continue. The budget and narrative lack specificity, detail and clarity. Much of the narrative reads the same component to component. With respect to expenditures, there is, for example, insufficient narrative to explain the numbers of 21st Century Learning Coaches, parent and community liaisons, educator and student podcasts and their respective deployment/distribution to implement the project. Some additional details are inaccurate and confusing, including some start dates in salary lines that appear to be typographical errors that kept getting printed.</p> <p>The STAPLES grant funds essentially would provide the support for the entire project, excepting very limited in-kind contributions. This singular base raises questions about ongoing operations and sustainability. The major investment in technology would be a one-time expense covered by the grant, but the maintenance of the variety of systems and continued support of what the GEC Consortium submits are key elements of personalized student learning are not inexpensive..</p>		
(F)(2) Sustainability of project goals (10 points)	10	3
<p>(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p>		

The current funding mix for the project does not provide a basis for sustaining the initiative.

Local support exists current and is promised for the future, as documented in letters of support, but local support and other funding are modest compared to the STAPLES initiative funding request, even excluding the significant capital proportion of grant funds proposed to build the technology network infrastructure. The Consortium outlines a plan to pursue sustainability that focuses on identifying effective and "cost beneficial" components and strategies through the independent evaluation, and working to sustain those components and strategies. The proposal provides insufficient detail about the scope and conduct of the evaluation conducted by an external Project Evaluator to determine whether and to what extent it can provide that determination.

The Consortium suggests further making sure the requested grant funds for the initiative help "increase institutional capacity" and "intellectual capital of permanent GEC staff" so that the GEC could manage much of the project internally and through new smaller grants and in-kind support. The Consortium provides limited evidence to support the potential success of that strategy.

Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)

	Available	Score
Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)	10	10

Competitive Preference Priority Reviewer Comments:

The STAPLES Project Parent and Community Involvement program provides a reasoned approach to encourage and engage parents and families in their child's learning. This effort, using a Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and collaborating with a local *Communities in Schools* non-profit organization and local businesses, seeks to develop "families into lifelong educators."

Utilizing the Consortium's Parent/Community Liaisons to connect with families and make them aware of community resources (supports provided by other public and private community agencies and organizations) presents a good strategy to help families value school ties and increase support for their child's learning. The Parent and Community Involvement program provides additional routes to engage parents and families with educators and other families so they can take advantage of existing and new school programs to support their child (e.g., learn about school transitions from elementary to secondary; understand how to access data to see how their child is progressing; become an effective advocate for their child), as well as learn about opportunities to enhance their own education (improving literacy, English language skills).

The Parent and Community Involvement program reflects a personalized approach to family and community engagement like the focus on personalized learning in the STAPLES Project. This effort presents opportunities to reach student families in different ways and establish strong family and community connections, as well as strong school-based connections that can benefit participating students and families. The program will "engage parents and families of participating students in both decision making about solutions to improve results over time and in addressing student, family, and school needs."

The GEC Consortium describes a reasonable plan to implement the effort, describes goals to increase the numbers of student, families and schools that would participate, and identifies an relevant set of student and family/community results with improvements projected year over year (e.g., increased attendance; improved academic performance; increased family awareness, access and use of community services). Student assessments will be disaggregated by subgroups.

Absolute Priority 1

	Available	Score
Absolute Priority 1	Met/Not Met	Met

Absolute Priority 1 Reviewer Comments:

The STAPLES Project application shows throughout a strong focus on the personalization of strategies, tools, and supports for students and educators. It is a consistent theme through the proposal. The project directly addresses

- all students becoming college and career ready using personalized learning plans and strategies and demonstrating success by meeting requirements based on high quality standards
- the use of data to personalize student instruction and educator professional development and the assessments that relate to each
- increased educator effectiveness through personalized professional development, career ladders and incentives; and
- emphasis on reaching and serving the highest need schools and students first with the initiative's personalized approaches

Total	210	124
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Race to the Top - District Technical Review Form

Application #0311TX-3 for Comal Independent School District

A. Vision (40 total points)

	Available	Score
(A)(1) Articulating a comprehensive and coherent reform vision (10 points)	10	7
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>.The Applicant's plan is both comprehensive and coherent. The goals are clear, ambitious and specific and addresses all four core educational reforms. The Applicant has proposed an exceptional approach that addresses the inequities of the Gudda Coma Education Consortium by incorporating the STAPLES Project to conduct and implement a rigorous program to improve the educational experiences of all participating students. The project will provide and implement a Seven-Prong Educational Plan for 6th-12th grade students that will focus on creating personalized learning environment experiences.</p> <p>. The Applicant cited conditions that justified the need of the project based on(1) the school district's increase population growth of Economically Disadvantage Students and Limited English Proficient Students (2) Only 56% of the school district's high school students graduate and are college and career ready both in Mathematics and English skills.</p> <p>. The Applicant need to provide more specific evidence in the plan that focus on individual student instruction . The Applicant's plan provided an array of goals but not enough details that the plan will need beyond what is outlined in the plan that might likely develop.</p>		
(A)(2) Applicant's approach to implementation (10 points)	10	10
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The Applicant showed evidence in implementing the plan by utilizing a quantitative analysis process which will identify each school campus scores and identify schools who would not benefit based on the competition's eligibility requirements.</p> <p>The Applicant provided tables listing participating schools, numbers of participating students (low-income and high-need) and participating educators(See Table: School Demographics)</p>		

(A)(3) LEA-wide reform & change (10 points)	10	10
<p>(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant presented a sound high quality plan designed for scaling up and transiting meaningful reform services to support district-wide reform change beyond the participating school districts and sustaining the plan which is evident in the STAPLES Project Sustaining Plan. . The Plan shows a significant approach in reaching it's outcome goals by developing the Seven-Prong Engagement Plan which will focus on creating a Personalized Learning Plan to improve student learning outcomes for all participating students. 		
(A)(4) LEA-wide goals for improved student outcomes (10 points)	10	10
<p>(A)(4) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant's goals, objectives and timelins are clear and specific and are aligned with the priorities of project that is seeking to meet. The Project Evaluator will be responsible for monitoring and assessing the growth of the goal areas. . The Applicant describes the plan's assessment model that will utilize disaggregated baseline data for each year of the project to determine proficiency status and the plan's growth. . The Applicant provided evidence to determine change and improvement in the district's achievement gap by using a baseline data system for each goal area and each subgroup within the three districts using their TAKS/StAAR testing measurement. 		

B. Prior Record of Success and Conditions for Reform (45 total points)

	Available	Score
(B)(1) Demonstrating a clear track record of success (15 points)	15	12
<p>(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant provided evidence of a clear record of success in the past four years in increasing equity in teaching and learning. The Applicant provided a description and tables reflecting the school district's raw data in the areas of closing the achievement gap, raising student achievement and high school rates, reducing dropout rates and increasing college enrollment.. . The Applicant provided evidence of making student performance data available to all stakeholders and evidence of achieving an ambitious and significant reform in lowest and achieving schools and in low performing schools. According to the state test, the Guada-Coma Education Consortium have been successful in raising student achievement in all core areas between groups and subgroups. This is evident in Table: GEC TAKS College and Career Ready Score Improvement by Subgroup. . The Applicant did not provide sufficient evidence in student performance data of how student achievement can move forward. 		
(B)(2) Increasing transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments (5 points)	5	5
<p>(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant provided sufficient evidence of the extent it has already made available school-level expenditures by the use of the three district's financial data linked to Texas Education Agency website. The website focus on the local government and agencies that opens their sites to the public for sharing information of their spending practices and providing a user-friendly format that enables the public to obtain more information 		

The Applicant provided evidence showing the availability of personnel salaries of instructional staff, support staff, teachers and non-personnel staff to the public.

(B)(3) State context for implementation (10 points)

10

10

(B)(3) Reviewer Comments:

The Applicant provided evidence of the State's commitment and support to implement the personalized learning environments. Evidence of the State's support in the plan's signed MOU's and the signatures of each partnership school district's Superintendents, School Board Members, and the local district's Mayors.

(B)(4) Stakeholder engagement and support (10 points)

10

8

(B)(4) Reviewer Comments:

- . The Applicant identified and obtained stakeholders input in the support and commitment in the development of the Plan. Letters of Support are located in the plan.
- . The LEA's teacher's 70% support of the plan was not evident.

(B)(5) Analysis of needs and gaps (5 points)

5

5

(B)(5) Reviewer Comments:

- . The Applicant provided evidence of the status of the plan's current needs and gaps by implementing a Comprehensive Needs Assessment which documents the status of the three district's implementation of their personalized learning environment. The identified gaps allowed a draft of the STAPLES Action Plan that addresses the plan's needs assessment.
- . The Applicant cited areas of gaps in each of the three districts and how they will be addressed. The cited gaps were: (1) lack of uniformity in the absence of a assessment system that produces scale scores for students in high school (2) a need of providing a mechanism for rewarding effective teachers (3) a limited effort at turning around the lowest-achieving schools due to lack of funds from investments.

C. Preparing Students for College and Careers (40 total points)

	Available	Score
(C)(1) Learning (20 points)	20	12
(C)(1) Reviewer Comments:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant provided a significant approach in implementing instructional strategies for all participating students to accelerate learning that align to college and career ready standards and college and career ready graduation requirements. Career Counselors will help students plan and develop a Personalized Learning Plan that will help them understand what they are learning and help them monitor the progress of their goals and benchmarks. . The Applicant provided evidence of improving learning and teaching outlined in STAPLES Project's Seven-Prong Plan that includes the plan's objectives, activities, timeline, deliverables and responsible persons. . The Applicant describes the approach in selecting the students in pursuing their course study that is aligned with college-career ready standards and graduation requirements. The plan approach will select students who are in highest need status in high school and move next to select the highest need students in middle school. . Professional development will be provided for educators which will focus on interventions and strategies used to personalized learning based on student's current skills and knowledge 		

- . The Applicant did not cite evidence of strategies provided of on-going parent involvement that aligned to the plan's Engagement Plan.
- . The Applicant did not provide evidence of students having access to experience diverse cultures through daily delivery of instruction..

(C)(2) Teaching and Leading (20 points)	20	20
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(C)(2) Reviewer Comments:

The Applicant has provided evidence of a high-quality plan for improving learning and teaching by increasing educator's capacity to support and increase student progress toward meeting college-ready and career-ready standards and college-ready and career ready graduation requirements. The Applicant's STAPLES Project will provide personalized professional development and professional growth opportunities for educators as educators work in personalized training and professional teams. The support for implementing a personalized professional development for educators is described in the plan to include (using targeted personalized, professional development, via 21st Century coaches, utilizing the Personalized Learning Coaches via shared instructional time and creating and implementing a teacher incentive program.

The Applicant provided a Table (Developnung 21st Century Educators) which outlined the plans objectives,activities, timeline,deliverables and responsible staff achieving the plan's goal of increasing the number oof students who receive instruction from effective and highly effective teachers.

The Applicant STAPLES Project will implement an educator's evaluation system to provide feedback on educator's effectiveness and to make recommendations to improve their effectiveness,

D. LEA Policy and Infrastructure (25 total points)

	Available	Score
(D)(1) LEA practices, policies, rules (15 points)	15	11

(D)(1) Reviewer Comments:

The Applicant provided evidence of the structure of the three participating school district's central offices, polices and rules that will govern each district's participation in the implementation of the plan.

- . The Applicant adquately describes the task of the goverence GEC/Executive Leadership Team comprised of representatives of each of the three school districts, however the Applicant did not provide sufficient evidence of how the School Leadership Team will review the plan's goverance structure of the participating schools..

The Applicant 's plan will allow students access by ED/20/20 to demonstrate mastery of standards at multiple time and ways and learning resources and instructional practices will be adaptable and fully accessible to students including Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners. The Applicant did not address how the plan will implement the learning resources and practices to all students.

(D)(2) LEA and school infrastructure (10 points)	10	10
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(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:

- . The Applicant will provide student one-on-one access and offline access to ensure all students have necessary access to learning, resources, tools and content.
- . The Applicant provides a multifaceted approach that allows parents and students to export their information in an open data format and that their school use interoperable data systems.

The Applicant's showed evidence ensuring that all stakeholders have access to the necessary content, tools and learning resources both in and out of the school to support the implementation of the plan.

E. Continuous Improvement (30 total points)

	Available	Score
(E)(1) Continuous improvement process (15 points)	15	15
<p>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant provided evidence of a rigorous continuous improvement process reflecting timely regular feedback on progress during and after the term of the grant. . The Applicant 's Performance Measures are outlined and achievable by subgroup and annual targets for the plan. Each of the Performance Mearsures were given a rationale of the selection and informed how the measure will provide timely formative leading information about the plan and how the measures will be reviewed and improved if it is insufficient to gauge implementation progress. . The Applicant's plan will provide formal data and summaries published semi-annually and reviewed by the plan's Project Management Team to make modifications and recommendations. Data will be disaggregated by each school's districts. . The Applicant's plan will involve the STAPLES Project staff and personnel to participate in a Project Review at the end of each program year and periodic assessments will be completed each month. 		
(E)(2) Ongoing communication and engagement (5 points)	5	5
<p>(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant's Continuous Improvement Plan will form the basis of STAPLES Project communication strategy. Feedback will be compiled as data is collected by the Project Evaluator so that the communication plan can be assessed. . Feedback will be obtained from all internal and external stakeholders and all stakeholders will be provided access to all reports via e-mail or direct communication with the Project Evaluator. . Internal stakeholders will be provided ananonymous internal communication via surveys and ongoing communication will continue via the project's website, emails, campus and parents meetings. The communication process will allow the internal stakeholders provide feedback by sending recommendations and compliants to the Project email address. . External stakeholders will have access to all approved reports including the Project's Annual Report. The stakeholders will be invited to conferences throughout the year so that information can be shared and feedback received. 		
(E)(3) Performance measures (5 points)	5	5
<p>(E)(3) Reviewer Comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant provides evidence of achievable performance measures by subgroups and annual targets. The project plan developed tables that addressed the applicant 's proposed performance measures with a timeline to accomplish each measure. Each of the eight tables of the performance measures addresses a rational, timeline, and formative leading information of how the plan will be reviewed and measured. 		
(E)(4) Evaluating effectiveness of investments (5 points)	5	5
<p>(E)(4) Reviewer Comments:</p>		

- . The Applicant describes how the plan will be evaluated. STAPLES Project Plan has been developed and will be implemented for the hiring of an External Program Evaluator to conduct on-going evaluation that will be disaggregated by district, school campus, grades and study groups.
- . The Applicant's Evaluation Plan will evaluate all of the plan's funded activities. and focus on use of time, staff, money and other resources to improve results using various straregies addressing use of technology, working with community and businesses.

F. Budget and Sustainability (20 total points)

	Available	Score
(F)(1) Budget for the project (10 points)	10	7
(F)(1) Reviewer Comments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant provided a reasonable and highly cost effect budget by outlining the sources of revenue for the project from local and state contributions but did not cite how funding can be used to maintain and replace computers and other equipment. . A detailed cost breakdown for all expenditures for the project year was provided. The Applicant use of a cost-effective approach for implementing the plan in addressing personalized learning environments is reasonable in relation to the plan's objectives, design and sustainability. . The Applicant did not provide evidence of how the plan's budget will address funding needed to leverage additional funding. 		
(F)(2) Sustainability of project goals (10 points)	10	10
(F)(2) Reviewer Comments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant showed evidence of the project's sustainability which is outlined in the STAPLES Projects High Quality Sustainability Plan (See Appendices) Objectives, Activities, Timelines, deliverables and responsible staff are evident in the plan.. . The Applicant showed evidence of the three school district's committment to sustain the effectiveness of the plan by building in an intellctual capacity using a Phase in/phase out approach insustaining progress. 		

Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)

	Available	Score
Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)	10	10
Competitive Preference Priority Reviewer Comments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . The Applicant provided evidence of implementing sustainable partnerships with parents, families and community. STAPLES Project developed a Parent ,Family, Community Engagement Framework that addressed the development of a variety of family related components (social,emotional and behavioral needs) that provide support to families. . The Applicant provided a Table: Parental Community Involvement, which outlines the objectives, activities, timeline,deliverables,and responsible persons that addresses the plan's Parental and Community Involvement Plan, the plan's Perfomance Measures, Population Level Desired Results and Budget. The plan addresses families's social. emotional and behavioral needs of high need students. 		

Absolute Priority 1

	Available	Score
Absolute Priority 1	Met/Not Met	Met

Absolute Priority 1 Reviewer Comments:

- . The Applicant provided evidence in how the plan will build on the four core educational assurance areas to improve learning and teaching through personalization of strategies, tools and support of students and educators aligned with college-career ready standards and graduation requirements.
- . The Applicant provided evidence of how the plan will address accelering student achievement and deepen student learning
- . The Applicant provided evidence of how the plan will increase the effectiveness of educators, decrease achievement gaps and expand student access to effective educators.
- . The Applicant provided evidence of how the plan will increase rates at which students graduate from high school prepared for college.

Total	210	187
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