

Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge

Peer Reviewer Selection Process

Soliciting Reviewers

Program staff anticipated requiring approximately eighty expert peer reviewers to evaluate approximately forty applications, assuming that each reviewer read three applications and assuming five reviewers per panel, with approximately ten alternate reviewers.

ED and HHS issued an invitation to apply for peer reviewer service in the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge to a list of past ED and HHS early learning and development peer reviewers and others. The program team compiled the list of peer reviewers who had served in existing early learning and development competitions at ED and HHS grant programs. Combining existing lists of peer reviewers from the Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences; Striving Readers; Early Reading First; the Office of Special Education Programs discretionary programs; Early Childhood Professional Development grants; Child Care; Head Start; Home Visiting; the HHS Administration for Children and Families Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation; and Health Resources and Services Administration's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems initiative generated a list of approximately 900 unique early learning and development experts. Additionally, ED and HHS included individuals serving on early learning and development Federal advisory boards, as well as individuals who were part of the HHS fellows program. This strategy generated a significant number of potential reviewers with the necessary expertise.

The invitation asked those identified individuals to forward the invitation to others they believed would be well qualified to serve as reviewers in the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge.

Panel Composition

Panels included five reviewers for each application. These groups were composed of experts with broad understanding of early learning and development, as well as specific expertise or knowledge in identified areas deemed critical to the competition. Specific criteria for peer reviewer expertise included: early learning and development; the assessment of young children; use of data systems; tiered quality improvement systems; professional development; program implementation and administration; research; and State-level systems-building. Individuals were drawn from various early learning and development sectors, including but not limited to child care, Head Start, early intervention, preschool special education, and State-funded preschool; they have experience with various age groups of young children, including infants, toddlers and/or preschoolers. Panels were chosen randomly from the final pool of the highest qualified cleared reviewers, taking into account State-of-residence conflicts and any additional indirect conflicts of interest for which waivers were issued. The competition team took steps to ensure that a panel did not consist of experts from only one particular sector of early learning and development. However, there was no requirement that individuals with specific expertise serve on every panel.

Reviewer Selection Process

Each Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge review panel consisted of five non-Federal employee reviewers. Program staff anticipated that approximately eighty reviewers would be needed (including alternates) for the competition. To the extent possible, the process for selecting reviewers was developed and implemented in a manner consistent with the process used to select reviewers for the Race to the Top State Phase 1 and Phase 2 competitions.

Step One (1): Establish list of potential applicants to invite.

Program staff compiled the initial list of reviewer candidates to invite using the list of prior peer reviewers in relevant competitions at ED and HHS, as well as key Federal advisory board or technical workgroup members. Program staff then invited the candidates to apply to become a peer reviewer.

Step Two (2): Establish list of available, qualified reviewers.

Career program staff screened individuals who expressed interest to ensure that they (a) indicated they were available for all training, off-site, and on-site review time periods; (b) had experience in appropriate areas; (c) submitted all requested information (including preliminary conflict-of-interest screening checklists). They ranked these individuals based on the reviewer screening checklist.

Step Three (3): Reviewing for Expertise by Senior Staff

ED and HHS convened a group of four senior career staff and four senior political staff (two career and two political staff members from each agency) to review the applications of the individuals most highly rated by the program staff. Senior staff participating in this review had expertise in early learning and development and knowledge of experts in the field. Using the qualifications outlined in the invitation for potential reviewers plus knowledge of a candidate's performance in the field, applicants were rated as "1-exceptional," "2- acceptable" or "3-not acceptable".

Step Four (4): Final Conflict of Interest Check for Final Peer Reviewer List

Based on a review of the conflict of interest screening checklist responses and results of a web search conducted on each individual, candidates were (a) cleared (and invited to serve), (b) contacted by phone or email to clarify responses to questions; (c) deemed to have an indirect conflict of interest for which a waiver could be granted; (d) deemed to have a direct or indirect conflict of interest for which a waiver could not be granted; or (e) determined by the program office not to be suitable for the review. Individuals cleared to serve and available for all required elements of the review were included on the "Final Peer Reviewer List." Individuals who were deemed to have conflicts of interest for which a waiver could not be granted were contacted by phone or email and told they could not review for the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge competition.

Step Five (5): Verification that no Reviewers are Debarred or Suspended

Program staff verified that no reviewers on the Final Peer Reviewer List appeared on any debarred or suspension lists.

Step Six (6): Issue Letters of Invitation

Program staff emailed letters of invitation to individuals on the Final Peer Reviewers List and invited them to secure travel arrangements. Included with the letter of invitation was an agreement through which the reviewers acknowledged the need for integrity in the review process, confidentiality with respect to their role as a peer reviewer, and understanding of the conflict of interest review and requirements. By accepting the invitation to participate in the initial peer reviewer training, reviewers agreed to abide by the reviewer guidelines in order to protect the integrity of the peer review process, ensure a level playing field for all applicants, and avoid bias and potential or real conflicts of interest.

Reviewer Guidelines

At a minimum, reviewers were required to agree to the following guidelines:

- 1) Reviewers must commit to participating in all required trainings for the review.
- 2) Reviewers will attend and participate in all panel discussions.

- 3) Reviewers must review and score independently all applications assigned to them and evaluate each application based solely on the selection criteria and priorities.
- 4) Reviewers will provide constructive written comments.
- 5) The five reviewers assigned to each Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge application are exclusively responsible for decisions related to the scoring of these applications. (Program staff, including panel monitors and the competition manager, will not provide reviewers with evaluative guidance on the content of their comments or the accuracy of their scores beyond guidance necessary to ensure that reviewer comments clearly address the scoring criteria and justify the reviewer's scores.)
- 6) If at any time during the review process, a reviewer becomes aware of a conflict of interest (either actual or perceived) with an application he or she is reviewing, the reviewer must notify the panel monitor and/or competition manager immediately of this conflict.
- 7) Reviewers will review applications only in secure, non-public locations in order to protect the confidential content of applications.
- 8) Reviewers will not discuss applications, the review process, or other information to which they are given access based on their role as a reviewer at any time outside of when it is necessary in order to fulfill their official capacity as a reviewer (i.e., reviewers will only discuss the content of applications in the panel discussion room while the designated panel monitor is present).
- 9) Reviewers may use only the contents of the application (as provided by program staff) to assign points to the selection criteria and may not introduce other materials. Reviewers are prohibited from using outside information (such as that found in Web searches) to make a determination about the scores and comments submitted for an application. Applicants will be discouraged from including Web links in their applications. In the event that they choose to nevertheless include such links, reviewers will not access Web links included in applications, as this could constitute consideration of outside information.
- 10) At no time during the competition will reviewers communicate with representatives of the media, applicants, or others outside of those designated by the program staff, until they have received explicit, written permission from ED and HSS to do.
- 11) Reviewer comments and scores will be released publicly as outlined in Section H.
- 12) The names of all peer reviewers (including alternates who attend reviewer training) will be released publicly at the end of the competition.
- 13) Reviewers will sign a confidentiality agreement before accessing applications.
- 14) Applications are to be read and reviewed only by the peer reviewers assigned to them by ED. Reviewers are prohibited from sharing the content of an application or the application's appendices with anyone outside of the designated review panel and with designated program staff.
- 15) During any stage of the review process, reviewers may have unscheduled time during which they will be required to remain on-site but will not be providing services to ED/HHS. Reviewers will be informed of the possibility of "down time" and the availability of computers and internet services for them to use during such times. Reviewers should not, however, expect "down time" or make extensive personal plans. The commitment to serve as a peer reviewer includes the entire on-site review period, and ED/HHS may require reviewers to work during this entire period.

Honoraria

Consistent with the level of remuneration provided to Race to the Top State competition peer reviewers, Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge reviewers received an honorarium of \$5,000 for their services. Reviewers who served as alternates received a pro-rated amount determined by the number of applications they reviewed. Honoraria for peer reviewers or alternates were not distributed until the completion of the competition.

Travel, Lodging and Per Diem

Reviewers were reimbursed for their travel, lodging, and per diem expenses for any applicable portions of the review that required travel. Reviewers were reimbursed for these expenses soon after their travel was completed for each stage of the review (for example, a reviewer who participated in the pre-review

training and on-site review was reimbursed for travel, lodging, and per diem expenses soon after travel was completed for each of the stages of the review).