

Focusing on Evidence for Aligned, Rigorous Turnaround Interventions

In February, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the Department of Education (ED) announced a grant competition for the creation of School Turnaround AmeriCorps. This special grant competition was directly inspired by the success of programs across the country that are using AmeriCorps members to support dramatic improvements in low-performing schools. The School Turnaround AmeriCorps competition is an effort to ensure that more students in low-performing schools gain access to these support resources.

Since the first announcement, there has been a tremendous amount of interest in the program. More than 100 entities have participated in technical assistance conference calls and webinars, and even more have submitted their intent to apply.

CNCS and ED would like to reiterate key aspects of the program, including the strong focus on evidence. In addition to exclusively funding turnaround interventions in low-performing schools, School Turnaround AmeriCorps grantees must implement interventions that are grounded in empirical research and evidence informed program evaluations. In particular:

- In the review process, no other category will count more toward the competitiveness of an application than the “evidence-informed and measurable impact” assessment criterion, which will evaluate the applicant’s ability to demonstrate that the proposed intervention is informed by evidence.
- School Turnaround AmeriCorps grantees will serve exclusively in low-performing schools where their efforts are needed most, and where there is already a turnaround plan in place through a state’s implementation of its ESEA flexibility plan or a School Improvement Grant.
- Applicants must submit a letter of support signed by district and school leaders. Furthermore, applicants must demonstrate how the proposed intervention is aligned with existing district and school turnaround plans.
- To be funded under the Notice of Funding Opportunity (Notice), grantees must use AmeriCorps members to improve educational outcomes for students in eligible schools through evidence-informed interventions that specifically support *school turnaround*:
 - Providing ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement;
 - Establishing a school culture and environment that improves school safety, attendance, and discipline and addresses other non-academic factors that impact student achievement, such as students’ social, emotional, and health needs;
 - Accelerating students’ acquisition of reading and mathematics knowledge and skills;

- Increasing graduation rates through strategies such as early warning systems, credit-recovery, and re-engagement strategies;
 - Increasing college enrollment rates through college preparation counseling assistance to include completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and college applications, and educating students and their families on financial literacy for college; and/or
 - Supporting school implementation of increased learning time
- In emphasizing the role that evidence will play in the review process, the Notice defines “evidence-informed interventions” as follows:
 - 1) Having a strong theory as demonstrated by a well-conceptualized framework articulated in a logic model; or
 - 2) Meeting the conditions of having a statistically significant or substantively important favorable finding in a correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias; a quasi-experimental study that meets the What Works Clearinghouse Evidence Standards with reservations; or a randomized controlled trial (RCT) that meets the What Works Clearinghouse Evidence Standards with or without reservations. See Appendix A of the Notice for more information. (LINK to Appendix A: http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/schoolturnaround_ac_notice.pdf#page=29)

CNCS and ED expect that many of the grantees that will be awarded School Turnaround AmeriCorps grants will implement practices that can be used to inform school turnaround efforts in other schools or districts. In order to ensure that the most successful practices are captured and distributed, CNCS will conduct a national evaluation of the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program to assess the effectiveness of the investment. These projects will also be monitored on an ongoing basis to help ensure they are successfully implementing the model that was proposed in their application and supporting school turnaround. The knowledge gained from this effort will help move us forward in the goal of enabling all children to learn and have a quality educational experience regardless of where they happen to live and go to school.