

This document summarizes the question and answer sessions from the pre-application meeting for the Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research Grants Competition. The meeting was held on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002 from 1:00pm to 4:00pm. Responses to questions were given by:

Heidi Schweingruber, Ph.D., PCER program officer, OERI  
Valerie Reyna, Ph.D., Senior Research Advisor, OERI  
David Arnold, Ph.D., Invited Speaker, University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
Pat Knight, Education Program Specialist, OERI  
Elizabeth Payer, Competition Coordinator, OERI

## **Q & A SESSION 1**

### **Question:**

**If an applicant submits a collaborative application with a request for a large amount of funding, will that reduce the number of awards to be made?**

Answer(s):

Schweingruber: Certainly the size of awards will be based on the size of the work that you propose and there is a limited amount of money. If there are excellent proposals with extremely good evaluation designs, but that are large, that may impact the number of awards that we can make.

Reyna: A collaborative proposal should not be two individual proposals stuck together. They should be truly collaborative, and they should draw on the strengths of both people in a considered way. And frankly, if it does that, it is more likely to be funded I would presume, because it would draw on multiple strengths. The notion is that the scope of work is what determines the budget. It's what is actually going to be accomplished. The budget should have a certain rationale on that basis.

**Will the national contractor pick up any of the incentive costs?**

Schweingruber: The grantees are responsible for that.

**The national contractor is responsible for the cost of the evaluation instruments and the data collection?**

Schweingruber: Yes

**Sample size minimum of 150 students, is that pre-attrition or post-attrition?**

Schweingruber: Ideally that's post-attrition.

**Announcement states that the FACES battery is a half-hour per child? [questioner suggests that the time is actually longer]**

Schweingruber: Those are guidelines that I had seen in looking at the instruments. I will show the battery in the next section. If you are more familiar with the instruments, you can adjust that according to your judgment. [NOTE: The time estimate is particularly for the *preschool* FACES battery, which is estimated at \_ hour.]

**We don't have to have parental consent prior to the submission, but we do need to have it once we've been awarded the grant?**

Schweingruber: Right. It would be virtually impossible to get parental permission prior to the application.

**Will applicants have a competitive advantage for including nonfederal funds?**

Schweingruber: No.

**Is there any information that you could give us on years 2 through 4 funding?**

Knight: It's dependent on what congress appropriates, but we would hope to be able to fund whatever is proposed, but it should be within the scope of the work. Our funding is always dependent on our next year's appropriation.

**Do you think there would be an interest in looking at Head Start, versus school district, versus day care?**

Schweingruber: Certainly it's not a primary focus, but if you were able to craft a complementary research study that supported looking at that based on empirical literature, that might be an interesting question.

**What about doing additional testing in addition to what the national contractor is doing, for example looking at the social aspects of literacy development, would that be of interest?**

Schweingruber: That falls under the complementary research study. Any additional measures would have to be justified based on the scientific context for the complementary research design. They really have to be motivated by looking at the empirical literature and what kinds of hypotheses and research questions you want to test in that complementary study.

**Is there interest in contrasting two different curricula?**

Schweingruber: That is totally feasible under the program. Again, you have to motivate and justify that comparison.

**Is this document and the on-line application, are these the only documents that are being issued to potential bidders?**

Schweingruber: Yes, these are the only documents.

**So the application is like the RFP? It is the RFP?**

Schweingruber: Actually, the Federal Register announcement is the RFP. All of the information is in the announcement. Any additional instructions that you see in the e-application that are not in the paper application are drawn from the Federal Register announcement. In what I've put together for today, I've pretty much drawn from the announcement and added some general comments that apply to any grant competition, any research grant competition, about how to write a strong proposal.

**Are there any restrictions on the same curriculum being used in two different projects?**

Schweingruber: No.

**In the RFP, it said that you could randomize by children or by classrooms, is that true?**

Schweingruber: Yes that is stated in the RFP. I'd like to hold off on some technical discussion until after Dr. Arnold's presentation.

**Is there a formula for determining how much of the grant can be used to purchase curriculum and curriculum materials?**

Schweingruber: We're not looking at a formula.

**So, it would be something that would have to be justified?**

Schweingruber: Yes

**I'm from a nonresearch-based institution in Puerto Rico. If we pair up with a researcher from a well-known university, would that put us in the same competition level, or would we still be less competitive than research-based institutions?**

Schweingruber: No, you then would be as competitive. Our intent in encouraging people to collaborate is so that people coming from the site end of things really do have the same edge that someone coming from a research institution has. So, that's one of the reasons that you really want to look at the kinds of credentials of the research consultant. Because we have such an emphasis on design and more technical issues, it really benefits you as a site to pull qualified people in to do that. That will help make you competitive.

**Do you have guidelines for how you define curriculum?**

Schweingruber: Yes, we do. In the announcement, as I mentioned. It needs to be portable enough that it can be implemented somewhere else. And it needs to be able to be

motivated by some evidence that this curriculum is going to work. I think the portability issue limits a number of options. In some cases, I know a curriculum might consist of some benchmarks or best practices, but they are not necessarily a full-blown curriculum. In those cases, you would have to take a look at it and see to what degree you think that is portable. And, whether you can justify, based on evidence that that kind of curriculum, organized in that way, is going to lead to the outcomes that we've identified.

**You mention that a curriculum should not require anything special. You don't consider training to be special?**

Schweingruber: Training is not special if it would be part of what is required for any implementation, for anybody using it beyond this study. The idea is if we find out what works, we want people to be able to capitalize on that. Practitioners should be able to use that knowledge, which means that the curriculum needs to be available to them.

**There's a statement in there that incentives can include creating additional classrooms. Does that extend to creating additional sites?**

Schweingruber: You need to consider how costly that would be in terms of your budget and whether it's going to be justified. I would guess that would greatly increase a budget.

**Can the funding be made retroactive to cover expenses prior to the announcement of the award [since awards may not be made until early June]?**

Knight: As per our regulations, if you receive an award, you can do 90 days pre-award costs. So, if the project start date is July 1<sup>st</sup>, you can go back 90 days and pay yourself back. That's only if you get an award. If you don't get an award you are out the money.

**Is there any guidance for signing over trademark rights? For agencies that have developed their own curriculum? Would we be required to have that curriculum up for use even though it's our own private curriculum?**

Schweingruber: We don't have any strings attached to this at this point. That's not something we're looking for. But, you need to consider the portability issue. You will *not* be asked to sign over trademark rights.

**What are your suggestions about documenting validity issues, that the curriculum will have the desired results on identified outcomes?**

Schweingruber: Look at the empirical evidence. You want to look at evidence related to the school readiness outcomes.

Reyna: That would include things, for example, if there are any actual studies on the curriculum. If there aren't, I would look at posited causal mechanisms. Think about whether there are things in the literature that people have said work, have shown that

would work for the target outcome that you want, that you would reasonably believe are incorporated in this particular curriculum.

**Is there any interest in special populations (i.e., elevated blood levels in children)?**

Schweingruber: As stated in the announcement, what we're looking for are the at-risk populations. The kids who we know from the evidence generally do not do well in terms of a lot of these outcomes. So, if that special population falls under that heading, they would likely be appropriate.

**As a follow up to that question, is there any interest in diversity and low-income? Does one take precedence over the other?**

Schweingruber: One really doesn't necessarily take precedence over the other.

Reyna: Again, this would really fall in the purview of the peer reviewers. They are going to be thinking significance. So, the argument that should be made is not just this is a sample of convenience, but this is an important sample to study because here's the potential significance.

## **Q & A SESSION 2**

### **Has the national contractor been selected?**

Schweingruber: We have not selected the national contractor. OERI will be responsible for selecting the national contractor. We will run a competition for the national contractor.

### **Will *all* of the measures be used in the FACES instrument?**

Schweingruber: The current plan is to use all of them. There may be some changes when we begin work with the contractor, but we want to make sure that we have sufficiently assessed the range of school readiness outcomes.

### **Will we have the full set of instruments available in time to get IRB approval? This might be a problem regarding the timeline.**

Schweingruber: We will be running the competition for the contractor in a timely way and I will be able to get that information out as soon as possible. [NOTE: Grantees might want to explore whether it will be possible to have an IRB board approve the full set of measures; then if there are later, minor changes, they might be able to approve only those changes in a more timely way.]

### **Can you provide a list of the attendees at today's meeting?**

Schweingruber: I will check into that.

### **Is the program limited to 4-year-olds or would cross-age preschool programs be appropriate?**

Schweingruber: We are interested in looking at the year before kindergarten. At the 4-year-olds in the pre-K year.

### **Will evaluators be sent in to collect data on children?**

Schweingruber: Yes.

### **Are you limited to apply for the PCER's grant, or can you also apply for the national contract as well? Can you be both?**

Schweingruber: You can't be the national contractor and the grantee.

### **Will parental consent need to be obtained three different times? For each year?**

Schweingruber: You need to get it in pre-K and then, depending on how you orchestrated that consent, it might be possible that it would be OK for the later years. But again, you might want to make sure that you check in with parents again.

**When are the FACES measures administered?**

Schweingruber: They are administered in the fall and spring of the pre-K year, the spring of kindergarten, and the spring of 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

**What cost-sharing is required?**

Schweingruber: None. No cost sharing is required. It's encouraged, but not required.

**Must the on-site coordinator be a full-time position?**

Schweingruber: That will vary by project depending on the scope. You will need to map out the use of that person's time.

**Will special consideration be given to regional and state distributions in awarding grants?**

Schweingruber: The reviewers are instructed to evaluate on the criteria with the ratings that we've given them. So, the quality of the evaluation design is really important. National significance is important as well.

**If this is intended to be a national evaluation, won't it be important to have distribution in rewards regionally?**

Knight: We're not allowed to do that. There's no regulation and we haven't taken public comment. We can't do that unless the law requires it or the regulation requires. We won't be allowed to do that. [NOTE: The reference to the law or the regulation means that in order for something to be required in the grant competition, it must have been specified in the Federal Register announcement.]

**I have a question about years 2, 3, and 4. The only year of implementation is year 1, is that correct? Years 2, 3 and 4 are just data collection.**

Schweingruber: Right. Unless in a complementary research study you are interested in doing continued data collection in the pre-K classrooms. In that case you are allowed to do that data collection in the subsequent years. But that's under your purview. That's *not* the national contractor.

**Can you phase in the intervention?**

Schweingruber: It's not currently in the regulations to phase something in. The Federal Register announcement is really a statement of regulations, and if it's not specified in the announcement, it's not part of the funding priority.

**Let me see if I can restate this in my own words. We are using the curriculum in a random trial during the first year. Then, in the simplest format, we'll be doing data collection in conjunction with a national contractor in years 2, 3, and 4. Year 4 is really data analysis. If we have a complementary research question, then there could be additional implementation based on what those research questions are.**

Schweingruber: Correct.

**Is the contractor responsible for individual incentives to teachers and parents?**

Schweingruber: What we have included in the announcement are the incentives for getting programs on board. We have not clearly asked grantees to be responsible for giving incentives to parents.

**Unless we propose additional incentives for that?**

Schweingruber: Yes

**Will there be future rounds of this award?**

Schweingruber: I've been told there is a decent possibility that there will be another competition in 2003.

**Could you clarify about individual incentives to parents?**

Schweingruber: We have not asked grantees to be responsible for those. They are not precluded if you want to pay for those. Certainly the contractor will be invested in collecting the data. We're not clearly asking it of the grantees for the parent interview. We haven't clearly said that grantees must provide those.

**Can the program developer be a Principal Investigator if the programs are done at a distance?**

Schweingruber: Yes, a program developer can be the primary investigator. One of the primary considerations is going to be the research qualifications. You really want someone involved who is going to be able to really attend to the design issues. So another issue to consider, we have mentioned [in the announcement] when curriculum developers are involved is some consideration of maintaining objectivity. We are really looking for evaluation, so you want to think through how that will affect how you randomize, for example.

**I want to clarify about the project narrative. You sort of implied that the literature review might be pervasive, you might put some of that in the significance piece, you might have some of that as you start to lay out your design. When you delineate the rigorous research plan which consists of the rationale for why you selected this curriculum and your evaluation design, did you intend for that to be the content of the second section, the quality of the research design?**

Schweingruber: Yes. I should point out that I'm not a reviewer. They are going to be peer reviewed. And so it's your judgment about, for that criterion, what is going to make the best argument.

**By curriculum, are you implying that it really should be comprehensive? If you are going to compare something against what you normally do, it needs to intervene across [all the domains], or would you accept a curriculum, for example a reading intervention program?**

Schweingruber: We are not only interested in comprehensive curricula. It can be more focused. But, the evaluation is going to cover a range of outcomes.

**Can funds be used for complementary research studies?**

Schweingruber: Yes, the grants are intended to support complementary research studies. Costs for those are part of your budget.

**Let's say Year 1 we don't see effects, so we reapply for year 2 to re-implement the curriculum and at the end of year 2 we don't see anything. What requirements or obligations do we have in years 3 and 4?**

Schweingruber: The hope would be that you've learned enough from year 1 that you would understand what had happened. Or, if it didn't look like it was implementation issues, in the announcement we do indicate that you have the opportunity to possibly implement a curriculum that is showing effects. That's designed to help avoid that issue.

**Will the national contractor be required to get OMB clearance for the instruments?**

Schweingruber: Yes.

**So that might delay the data collection.**

Schweingruber: Hopefully not.

**Is there any advantage or disadvantage to having the research be in a local area or be across states?**

Schweingruber: Again, I'm not a reviewer, but you should look at the criteria and give thought to what those alternative designs might buy you in terms of the criteria.

**If a curriculum has been in place for several years, can that curriculum be evaluated or does a new curriculum have to be implemented?**

Schweiggruber: It doesn't have to be a new curriculum, but you need to work through if you have something established, how you are going to work a control group, and how you are going to do random assignment.

### Q & A SESSION 3

**If some of the grantees are doing random assignment at the class or school level, and some are doing them at the individual level, how will the national contractor analyze that data?**

Arnold: It actually might be interesting to have it done several different ways. You can create measures of effect size that are sort of standardized across approaches to try to get your best overall estimate, but you can also look to see whether you've gotten bigger effect sizes at sites that have been assigned different ways.

Arnold: I would actually invite the sites to be in on the random assigning. For some reason that's a topic that people are very skeptical of. People tend not to believe that you really did random assignment. If they can actually see the name being pulled out of the hat, or the coin being flipped, or Excel sorting the numbers, I think they are a lot more open to believing that this really was a fair deal and everyone had their chance.

**If you randomly assign, for example by school within a district, would there be a design that would say match up characteristics as close as you can, which would not be a random assignment?**

Arnold: If you can match before you randomly assign, that does not decrease the validity of the random assignment. What you can't do is say, okay I'm going to put this one in pot A and this one in pot B because they look similar. What you have to do is say these two look similar, now I'm going to flip a coin to see where they go. That's fine. As long as you still randomly assign after they are matched, there should be no problem with that. That just decreases error variance, which is a good thing.

**Question about the control group and the comparison group: if the quality of the "home grown approaches" varies, how will that affect comparisons?**

Arnold: I think if my recollection is right, the proposal doesn't demand that the control group be the home grown variety. But if it is the home grown variety, which I'm guessing would be the most common design, I think the key to that is going to be to at least try to measure what's going on in those classrooms. The variation you have there is both bad and good. The bad part is, it throws more noise into it; that makes it somewhat harder to see what's going on. The good part is that's a beautiful part about answering the questions about who is this working for, when, and why. So what you have to do I think is try to build a case that you are going to pull out what's important to know about that, measure it, put it in your model, and, if not pre hoc at least post hoc, to try to think through what some of those key variables might be. And try to see if you can increase understanding. The nice thing about random assignment is it should even those things out. If you have enough power, at least.

**Whose responsibility will it be to conduct the statistical analysis, the grantee or the contractor, or an amalgamation of both? Will the contractor be getting case-level data or site-level data?**

Arnold: The contractor is collecting all of the core evaluation data, so they will have it at the case level. They are responsible for cross-site analysis. Certainly the sites will be getting their site-specific data and will have access to the cross-site data, so individual grantees can certainly be doing some of that analysis as well.

**Grantees will get case-specific data?**

Schweingruber: Yes

**Given the time frame, if the grant is awarded over the summer and curricula start in the fall, given two difficulties, one with the local IRB that we have to wait for. Secondly, the national contractor getting OMB approval and others, we could well face a situation where the curriculum has been implemented sometime before the pretest, which from a design perspective [is a problem]. I don't know what can be done about this, but I really think it is an important issue. Has that been discussed, have you thought about that?**

Arnold: I just want to say that at least in most of the schools I know, you could put in an IRB proposal with the measures that are thought to be in there. Most places then let you send in an addendum later, which might be quicker than starting from scratch. Because it sounds like a lot of what's going in is known.

Schweingruber: Number one, we don't really anticipate that much deviation from the instruments in the FACES battery. But, I did need to mention that there might be small deviations. So, you can really count on that as being the primary battery. The other issue, we are acutely aware of the timeline issues and all I can say is that I am partly responsible for pushing this timeline so that it makes this stuff feasible, and I'm going to do everything I can to make it happen. And that's all we can do. We're totally aware of what the constraints are. We understand the need for that pretest before we have a lot of mileage already in those classrooms under those interventions, and we're going to do what we can to make sure that it happens so that we have the most rigorous evaluation design possible.

**A question about matching. If you categorize schools or classrooms by two or three things and start trying to match and end up with schools that are hard to match and then those not being in the study, your generalizability is undermined. I just want people to be aware of that.**

Schweingruber: I just want to mention that in the announcement we've really encouraged that randomization happen at the classroom or child level, not necessarily at the school level.

**The RFP calls for 150 children to be involved in classrooms, and we're all worried about attrition. How much over-sampling would you suggest to an applicant?**

Arnold: There have been such huge variabilities depending on your sample. I hate to give a vague, nonspecific answer, but I think I have to because where you are going your study matters so much. Oregon Social Learning Center gets 99 percent of their families back. They sent someone to France to do a follow-up assessment. They are sort of off the curve. Most people can't get those kinds of numbers. It really depends on the population. In Springfield we have a lot of people moving back to Puerto Rico that we lose. That might be an issue other places. Sorry to be vague.

**Some of our studies we have 60 to 80 percent movement especially in the younger years and then the retention in the study, because how many of those 60 to 80 percent who move can you capture back? So let's say you don't capture back, so you're doubling your sample. So, let me go back to my point, which I'm sure you are aware of. If we have 10 sites and every site starts out with 300 kids as a minimum and we have to give 300 FACES tests, so 300 times 10 is 3,000. And each test takes about an hour [NOTE: The estimate the program officer has seen is one half-hour for the preschool battery], but you can't test all the kids on all the days, etc. This could take a huge number of people to fan out, as you know, to do those tests. We tried to figure out an estimate of time in terms of getting the tests done at the pretest. I have a lot of sympathy for whoever the national contractor is.**

Arnold: I'll also just add that there is a conceptual issue that goes on top of that. That is, supposing that 150 is where you want to end up. It's not the same to get to the 150 by starting with 300 and ending up with the 150, as it is to start with 160 and get there. Because you have no way of knowing what the half you lost were going to be like, and how representative they are. This isn't just some kind of a technical, statistical problem, this is real life stuff. It may well be that kids that are absent from the most, so if you lost kids because you didn't test on the days they were there. Those kids probably are different from kids that are coming every day. So, I think when possible, you are much better off putting your resources into getting all the kids, or as close to all the kids as you can. You are better off making it a slightly smaller number than to making it tons of kids, but it's only a quarter of who you started with. You're not going to know what to make of that. So I would err on the side of putting the resources into going to France rather than into doing three more kids to start with. It's harder sometimes to track them down than to just test more, but it's better.

**I have a comment on your first slide. Your first slide said to read the proposal. I am an OERI staff member, and I would plead with all the applicants to pay attention to the evaluation criteria. We in the past have had first-rate applications that did not address one of the criteria, and so it gets perfect points on all the others, and we can't fund it because it got a zero in one area.**

[Some extended discussion here about approaches to analysis using HLM.]

**Random assignment doesn't, I mean just remember, we have to think about the size of the sample. Just because you randomize doesn't mean you'll necessarily get equal groups, there is an issue about size, and that's where your comments about power are important. You really need to do the power analysis ahead of time. Just because you randomize doesn't mean you are going to get comparable or quote unquote, same groups. So, there are two steps there.**

Arnold: The larger the number of groups, the more likely it is going to be that your random assignment is going to work and that's what a power analysis is going to tell you.

**If the grantee is collecting data on parents and staff, are we also responsible for training on that piece?**

Schweingruber: I knew this question would come up. I would be safe and include in the budget some training.

#### Q & A SESSION 4

**In the RFP references to “standardized training materials” (i.e., curriculum), I was puzzled by what you meant by that.**

Schweingruber: That relates to the portability of the curriculum. Some set of issues or some kind of training that is part of implementation, and I would expect to some degree if you have a curriculum training, has to be standardized to some extent so that you can say those people are implementing that curriculum. That’s really the issue related to being standardized. It’s that it becomes a consistent way that people are being trained to implement so that it makes it portable and it makes implementation in one place look like, as much as you can, implementation somewhere else.

**So you don’t mean standardization in the psychometric sense?**

Schweingruber: No.

**The trouble you always have working with young children is that you need an assessor per child. There has got to be some time period within which you would like to have all of the pretests done. And you know the larger the sample, the more that could stretch out over weeks unless you have quite a number of people who are going to be sent in by the national evaluator. There’s gotta be a way to work that out in terms of how to get all that done.**

Schweingruber: Coordination of those kinds of issues will be the responsibility of the contractor who is coordinating the data collection.

**What has happened in the past in other national evaluations, because they hit crunch time, sites have been asked to supply assessors because they can’t get that many people to get that many places at the right time?**

Schweingruber: I really can’t anticipate at this time. We don’t know what the sites look like. We don’t know where sites are. I really can’t anticipate some of those answers.

**In terms of professional development or training for implementation, is there a limit like not more than half a day once a month? Maybe an additional 2-day training. Is there a limit to the amount of technical assistance? Do you have to provide the same amount of training or technical assistance to the control group, even if they are the homegrown, garden variety?**

Schweingruber: The plan, the idea is that whatever this implementation looks like, it should resemble an ordinary implementation. So if someone wasn’t part of this study and wasn’t going to end up being in an evaluation of the curriculum, they should get the same kind of attention that someone who is in this study and is part of an evaluation is going to

get. So that we really know that this curriculum in the way it's normally implemented is having an impact or not.

**When you said the training should “resemble the ordinary,” I think you are trying to find out what’s not ordinary. What’s going on out there right now is ordinary. So, if there is a curriculum that requires something different than what is currently seen as ordinary, that would in fact be the intervention.**

Schweingruber: My understanding of the question was, when you are doing an implementation of a particular curriculum, the way we've defined curriculum means that there are going to be manuals and training associated with it that are pretty standard. My understanding of the question was, is there some requirement, could you go beyond that, etc.? My answer is no, you can't go beyond that. We're looking at, certainly in some cases this curriculum is going to be something new and out of the ordinary for a particular site. But in putting it in place, we're asking that there not be any special treatment given. In some cases in an evaluation, you might see particular attention given to implementation in that place so that you get this extraordinary implementation that is absolutely never going to happen if another school decides to adopt it without the special attention. That's the concern that I was addressing. That we don't want that kind of special attention.

**If this special attention is just one more day of staff development a month, could then be implemented all over the world if it changed the way the bread rose, but it's not ordinary because it's one more day?**

Schweingruber: If it's one more day that's related to a typical implementation of the curriculum, fine. If it's additional professional development, then you are getting into the realm of maybe a complementary research study.

**It's very difficult to disentangle curriculum for children and professional development for adults. It sounds like you are asking to not change what happens in the world of the adults even as you want to see does it produce change in the world of children.**

Schweingruber: If the curriculum is a change from business as usual for particular sites, you are going to change the world of adults. What we're asking is that it not be a kind of change that is unique to somebody involved in this study, because they are part of an evaluation, but that could be the kind of change that you would see if a totally independent school district or site decided we are going to implement this curriculum. Certainly that's going to be, or could be, change to business as usual for the adults.

**Are there any nonallowable costs? Are indirect costs allowed?**

Payer: Yes, indirect costs are allowed. The indirect costs would be whatever negotiated indirect cost rate that your organization has. If you don't have a negotiated indirect rate, that's handled differently. I think you budget indirect costs (using an estimate).