

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

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 08/19/2022 02:08 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Mississippi First, Inc. (S282A220001)

Reader #3: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of Project Design		
1. Quality of Project Design	35	32
Sub Total	35	32
Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants		
Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants		
1. Subgrant Applicants	15	14
Sub Total	15	14
State Plan		
State Plan		
1. State Plan	35	35
Sub Total	35	35
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Management Plan		
1. Management Plan	15	14
Sub Total	15	14
Priority Questions		
Competitive Preference Priority 1		
Competitive Preference Priority 1		
1. CPP1	1	1
Sub Total	1	1
Competitive Preference Priority 2		
Competitive Preference Priority 2		
1. CPP2	2	2
Sub Total	2	2
Competitive Preference Priority 3		
Competitive Preference Priority 3		
1. CPP3	1	0
Sub Total	1	0
Competitive Preference Priority 4		
Competitive Preference Priority 4		
1. CPP4	3	3

	Sub Total	3	3
Competitive Preference Priority 5			
Competitive Preference Priority 5			
1. CPP5		3	3
	Sub Total	3	3
	Total	110	104

Technical Review Form

Panel #1 - State Entities Panel - 1: 84.282A

Reader #3: *****

Applicant: Mississippi First, Inc. (S282A220001)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of Project Design

1. The Secretary considers the quality of the design of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers:

Reader's Score: 32

Sub

1. The extent to which the proposed project demonstrates a rationale; (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The applicant strongly makes the case the Mississippi is a small, primarily rural state, and it has been difficult to attract the type of investment that have helped other states grow charter schools (e20), and the previous SE CSP was instrumental in funding startup costs (e28), and this CSP grant paired with a recent significant commitment of philanthropic dollars (e26) will ensure the proposed quality design of the program is implemented and impactful.

The applicant has proposed a fully developed project that is highly likely to realize the objectives of the proposed project. One example is the component of expanding access to high-quality schools in districts that are identified by the state for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI). All but one current operating charter school are in districts identified for CSI. The applicant has indicated five of the ten new schools supported by CSP subgrants are planned for replication of high-quality schools in these districts, which is an approach that is supported and informed by research (e19). Competitive priority points will be given to CSI districts, rural, turnaround, models that serve at risk students, or high school(e23). In Districts rated D, F (struggling students, failing schools), the authorizer is allowed to approve charter schools directly, which aligns with objective to use charter schools to improve struggling schools by increasing educational opportunity and equity for students that are lacking high quality options (e17, E21). This makes it highly likely that these schools could be authorized given they are using proven models from existing charter schools.

The plan to double number of charter schools in five years is reasonable (10 new schools) given the statewide authorizing model (e17), the enhanced facility support (e17) and the proposed focused TA support (e12, e177). There is limited access to high quality schools in rural areas, and the applicant identifies both need and demand to add at least 2,750 high quality seats in rural areas, including the Delta. Two charter schools currently operate in these areas and supports in the grant to provide TA for replication. Priority is also given in the subgrant to developers opening in rural areas (e27).

The project components sufficiently address the key priorities, and the applicant is experienced and demonstrated success in identifying, researching, and supporting best practices in charter school authorizing (e16). For instance, TA activities such as supporting the subgrantees to become high quality by offering improvement TA to address key operational and academic plan development are identified (e21, e181).

Both TA providers have extensive TA experience in supporting high quality charter schools, including intensive

Sub

support of at least 3-5 applicants (e19). Applicant has history and success in working with both charter schools and traditional schools, working on issues such as accountability, educator pipeline, which increases likelihood of success in charter-district collaboration activities and sharing best practices (e23, e25). Selection of a timely and universal topic such as addressing the teacher shortage is engaging for both district and charter schools and focusing the charter district collaboration using best practices such as the Community of Practice model (e13, e25) is a focused approach. To increase transparency and disseminate the work, they plan to share and measure best practice strategies (e181) with the intent that sharing these mutually developed best practices improve charter district relationships (e182)

The applicant has stated that high school quality is lacking in the state and there are currently no charter high schools. The plan is to focus additional support to develop a charter school option used to increase educational opportunity and equity for students with no access to high quality schools (e181). Providing additional specialized targeted support through TA both pre-application and post- authorization and through the grant term demonstrates an understanding of the challenges of opening the first charter high school in the state so that they can have at least one high school authorized (e13, e46 e181).

The applicant is also the recipient of [REDACTED] philanthropic support with same goals as the CSP, which extends the reach of CSP funding and strengthens organizational and charter school infrastructure. By leveraging both funding streams, the applicant makes a convincing case for both the need and opportunity to have a greater impact that is not possible without the other. This includes support for applicant recruitment and support, such as fellowships, and supporting successful charter schools to scale/replicate (e20, e26).

The applicant included a research-backed, comprehensive logic model for all objectives, clearly identifying inputs, activities, project measures and short to long term outcomes (e177-e182).

Weaknesses:

The applicant provides a strong rationale for their plan in the narrative, and will give priority to Eligible applicants using turnaround models, or locating in CSI districts by allocating competitive preference points (e22). However, on the rubric priority stating how the applicant will support the use of charter schools to improve struggling schools or turn around schools (both charter and public schools), the applicant stated that it is unable to meet or carry out this priority due to the nascency of their sector (e17).

Reader's Score: 4

2. The extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the project and will produce quantitative and qualitative data to the extent possible; and (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The Performance measures for the stated objectives (e24, e25, e181) are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the project, producing both quantitative and qualitative data (e177-182).

Performance measures are written as SMART goals (e24, e25, e70, e73, e177-182). For example, for Objective 3, one of the performance measures is stated as “Annually, 100% of subgrantees meet at least 1 priority category for increasing educational opportunity and equity”- which is measured quantitatively by the number of subgrantees from reviewer score sheets.

Sub

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

3. The ambitiousness of the State entity's objectives for the quality charter school program carried out under the CSP State Entities program (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The applicant successfully lays out why Objective 1, doubling MS charter sector in five years is both ambitious and achievable, by indicating the current pipeline, the alignment with the authorizing schedule (e28, e29), the increased TA support to developers in designing a quality application, navigating the authorization process, and the increased awareness and outreach to identify quality applicant pool are activities that will be provided under the CSP grant, and the additional philanthropic funds that are aligned to support this work (e25,e26).

Objective 2 requires 12 subgrants be awarded with 100% of the 10 new schools to be high quality enough for them to be authorized by the state authorizer as new or to meet the high-quality standard to replicate. The applicant has set out competitive preference points that support using charter schools to advance educational opportunity and equity (Objective 3). Two of the subgrants would be considered continuation awards (e26, e27, e28, e29). Both of these objectives are soundly developed, represent a reach for the applicant, and are achievable given both the authorizing climate, and the lift that additional technical assistance will provide.

Objective 4 includes district-charter collaboration. The applicant has a history of working with both parties (e23, e25), however there are no current initiatives encouraging this work (e26). Selecting a topic for collaboration around teacher shortages is something that is a challenge for both charter and traditional schools. Identifying best practices together through a Community of Practice model is both ambitious and attainable (e23, e26, e70, e73, e181).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

4. The extent to which the number of subgrant awards anticipated for each grant project year is supported by evidence of demand and need, and the proposed average subgrant award amount is supported by evidence of the need of applicants (up to 20 points)

Strengths:

The proposed number of subgrants is 12 (e20, e24,e27) is achievable, given demand outstrips supply based on their analysis of existing quality seats (e27) and that two of those subgrants would go to existing SE grantees as continuation awards (e228). This includes the plan to award at least 2 up to 3 subgrants to eligible schools per year (e24, e27). Use of four information sessions (e177) will help create an awareness of charter schools in the public school sector. In addition to the separate funding to support applicant pipeline development (e30) is critical and help bring forth high-quality charter school developers (e29).

Subgrantees award amounts are set at [REDACTED]0/year for 5 years for new schools and [REDACTED]ear for continuation schools that would be on extension on the expired SE grant but have remaining eligibility (e27e28). The applicant provided sufficient documentation regarding the methodology and calculations used to determine the number of proposed awards and amounts (e213, e229), and the methodology narrative included prior SE grant amount was [REDACTED] per year, per pupil in MS is low, and rural, high schools and those serving at-risk students have additional start-up costs beyond normal charters (e28).

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The applicant stated the expected average subgrantee award to be ██████████ per year or ██████████ for grant term, with a cost per student of no more than ██████████ (e28), which reflects an understanding of economies of scale in that school size would need to be 300 students or more by final year of the grant. This supports sustainability and increased likelihood of success, given the low per pupil allocations (e28) for operating post grant award.

Applicant has provided sufficient evidence of a needs assessment both in their description to identify the award amount, as well as setting out numerous CSP -specific requirements for the sub-awardee CSP applicant to be submitted as part of the subgrantee application, including needs analysis, community support, parent support, projected enrollment, demand, responsive operations plans, impact on school desegregation efforts (e34-e37). The applicant noted that the CSP grant was instrumental for prior charter school start-up, given the low per pupil operating funds, and lack of access to funds until schools open (e28).

Weaknesses:

The methodology reasoning around subgrant award amounts could have been laid out more fully, including providing supporting documentation regarding the methodology and calculations, rather than primarily stating that they were using the same grant amount that was provided to the last round of SE CSP grant recipients (e28).

Reader's Score: 18

Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants - Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants

1. The likelihood that the eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the program will meet the State entity's objectives and improve educational results for students.

Strengths:

The applicant provides a fully developed plan that includes tables and full descriptions of the activities, timelines and required components of the subgrant process (e40-e45). Key activities and details about the process for applying for and receiving a subgrant are identified as aligned to the MCSAB authorizer RFP which begins with TA in March and concludes with decision making in September (e40, e41,42).

The Applicant focus on rural and high schools is well developed, including the identified need, the rural nature of the state, the current traditional public school offerings and ratings. (e46).

The applicant provides a comprehensive description of the subgrant and requirements for subgrantee application and awardee selection and monitoring which is fully developed (e46-e51). Including the MS CSP application packet supplement, which outlines that the authorizer requirements must be met, and supplemental material must be provided for the CSP grant application is provided in the appendix (e184-e205). It is this section that comprehensively addresses the subgrant application requirements:

- Application asks developers to provide organization charts and explain relationships regarding roles and responsibilities, including numerous supplemental questions if developer is using an ESP(e186-e187)
- Subgrantee application asks for applicants to describe transportation plan (e199)
- CSP subgrantees are asked to provide details on how reliable and safe transportation will be provided for students (e199).
- Subgrantee applicants are asked to illustrate a robust family and community engagement plan, including examples of family engagement activities and community centered engagement plan (e197)

Applicant thoroughly describes how they will work with various state departments and the authorizer to educate these entities about the needs and flexibilities of charter schools (e58), including intentionally reaching out at least annually due to changing requirements and personnel changes at the state and authorizer entities (e59).

Applicant includes a detailed description of the TA to provide support to the authorizer to support the role of authorizer in reviewing charter school performance and operations (e59), including assessing annual performance by updating the existing performance framework (e60), and providing MCSAB/Authorizer the ability to hire an expert who can examine the proposed new framework and provide critique and substantive recommendations (e60) In addition to academic performance frameworks, TA funds will be used to support the authorizer in developing financial guidance, tools and other supports to implement the regulatory framework. (e62).

Applicant provides a well-developed monitoring plan, including identify applicants that might become at risk are provided additional monitoring. (e70, e71, e72, e74, e180, e182, e206, e207, e208). Thorough process outlined to assess applicants for risk and may receive tiered monitoring based on that review (e45).

Applicant provides a comprehensive Job description of the CSP Coordinator which outlines the responsibilities of monitoring, oversight and coordination activities in a substantive manner (e206-e208). There is a detailed process for recruiting and selecting peer reviewers uses both internal and external stakeholders, such as applicant and TA contracted reviewers, and former CSP subgrantees (e43). Applicant will ensure the pool of reviewers reflects people of diverse backgrounds (e44) and provide an annual half day reviewer training (e44).

It is clear from the application that the subgrant will support high quality charter schools that will improve educational results for children in districts rated D and F, rural areas in a predominately rural state, and increased quality high school options (e22, e27, e39, e39). Four informational sessions are a sufficient amount per year for prospective developers in the lead up to the authorization cycle (e177, e224) will be provided by an already selected partner that has experience in this area (e30, e74).

Weaknesses:

The applicant's primary marketing efforts are narrowly focused on a "CSP eligible" category for developers, in which only developers that have already submitted a letter of intent to the authorizer or are in the authorizer application process would be targeted for TA (e29, e30). Pipeline development and public awareness to generate leads for potential founding groups/developers may be addressed by the additional philanthropic funder but it was unclear and not fully demonstrated (e29, e30, e41, e42).

Reader's Score: 14

State Plan - State Plan

1. The State entity's plan to--

Reader's Score: 35

Sub

1. Adequately monitor the eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the State entity's program; (up to 10 points)

Strengths:

A fully developed monitoring plan presented, including identifying applicants that might become at risk are provided additional monitoring. (e70, e74, e180, e182, e206, e207, e208). The applicant provided clear monitoring guidelines and a clear description of what would qualify for at risk monitoring (e70) and opportunities for stakeholders to provide feedback to make improvements to the project (e73).

Sub

The three people responsible for monitoring have extensive experience monitoring grants, and understanding the charter school sector (e71,72).

The applicant will mandate training providing clear guidance on the process for drawdowns, the budget amendment process, and the monitoring plan (e47).

The overview of the three levels of scrutiny provides strong oversight of the payment and drawdown process.) and subgrantees can be moved to higher levels of scrutiny if issues arise (e48). The development of a milestone document is a unique approach to monitor not only the financials of the subgrantee, but also their progress on essential pre-opening and operating milestones to support the opening, operation and sustainability of a high-quality charter school (e49).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 10

2. Work with the authorized public chartering agencies involved to avoid duplication of work for the charter schools and authorized public chartering agencies; (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The application demonstrates a fully developed plan to avoid duplication of work for the charter schools and the authorizer. CSP subgrant application will rely as much as possible on existing sources of information to avoid duplication and reduce the paperwork burden on charter schools (e30). For instance, the plan to align evidence and documentation for needs milestones and reporting that is already created by schools or required by the authorizer is an efficient way of avoiding duplication and the paperwork burden (e50, e55)

Another effective example of reducing the burden and increasing collaboration between agencies, is that the applicant will provide a twice a year update to the authorizer, which will provide a summary of the subgrantees, and if it is determined that information that is collected in this process can reduce the reporting burden on charter school, it will be shared with the authorizer (e55). By committing to do this work internally, this is an innovative way to avoid duplication, whereas the applicant is only asking for information that cannot be found elsewhere or have a specific need for. They will internally review the authorizer and MBE's reporting submission requirements to determine what can be utilized by allowing schools to submit these same reports (e56).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

3. Provide technical assistance and support for--

- i. The eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the State entity's program; and**
- ii. Quality authorizing efforts in the State; (up to 10 points)**

Strengths:

The application outlines a fully developed plan to provide technical assistance support for both subgrantees and quality authorizing. The applicant TA plan primarily focuses on supporting the two areas identified in the metric, TA to eligible applicants receiving subgrants and quality authorizing in the state (e56, e223-e226). It is well designed

Sub

and appropriate. The activities supported for subgrantees includes recruitment and enrollment, including eliminating barriers to educationally disadvantaged students, (e57), retention of students and reducing the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices (e57). Allocations to identify specialized TA are reflected in the description and budget (e57, e70, e179, e223, e225, e226). Budget allocations to bring in experts for at least three hours of training on certain topic areas, such as exclusionary discipline practices are also provided. It is realistic at this stage to allocate funding but not fully develop the training in areas that require additional expertise.

The applicant has identified strong actions that will support quality authorizing in the state. This includes hiring a national charter school expert to perform a full, in-depth evaluation of the authorizer both in the first and last year. Once this evaluation is completed, TA will be developed to address areas identified by the evaluation and provided to the authorizer. One of the areas that has already been identified is the development of a performance framework. It is something that has already been identified as a project in the works by the authorizer, but this will bring additional funding and expertise to support this important renewal tool (e227). Finally, the TA plan includes the development of a financial regulatory framework (e227). Both of these frameworks clarify and support standards that by identifying them, work to support charter school autonomy and accountability, by creating clear standards (e68).

Evidence that the applicant can provide the type of comprehensive TA is supported by experience of the lead personnel. The Principal Investigator has experience and qualifications aligned with overseeing external partners, including studying effectiveness of AR ACT Aspire program, teaching, data tracking, project management and grant administration (e72, e74). The lead TA partner, Embark, has experience and qualifications in education policy and practice, worked with the authorizer, and has a Master's in Education Policy and Management from Harvard (e72).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 10

4. The State entity's plan to solicit and consider input from parents and other members of the community on the implementation and operation of charter schools in the State; and (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The Applicant has extensive experience using stakeholder surveys and focus groups to inform and improve their work, including telephonic, scientific surveys, statewide online survey and focus groups and they plan to use their private grant dollars to continue this work by conducting in person focus groups and telephone surveys (e67). Findings from community input will inform decisions such as preference points, how they communicate with parents about the purpose and availability of charter schools, and how to support current schools to make desired improvements. Findings will be published on CSP website (e68).

The Advisory Committee Activity and Timeline outlined in table (e68, e180) contains targeted activities that support the incorporation of the parent and community voice on the implementation and operation of charter schools, and the work is supplemented with outside dollars which increases its impact and reach.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

Sub

5. The degree of flexibility afforded by the State's charter school law and how the State entity will work to maximize the flexibility provided to charter schools under such law. (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The MS state charter school law is based on the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools Model Law and has strong language to support quality authorizing as well as significant flexibility (e16, e68). For instance, charter schools in MS are granted autonomy from local school district and state BOE policies unless specifically required by state or federal law (e16, e32). One of proposed projects which will have an effect on maximizing flexibility already afforded under the MS law, is the creation of a financial regulatory framework that respects autonomy, works to clarify what constitutes a notice of concern so that decision making is not arbitrary, and works to evaluate the authorizer on standards including respecting charter schools' autonomy (e68).

Past work by the applicant includes working with the authorizer to implement best practices in support of the law, including the adoption and implementation of best practices around important elements of authorizing that allow flexibility such as charter school application, application process, performance framework, renewal guidelines and renewal application (e16, e17). Given the strong experience of the lead TA providers, lends confidence to the success of the proposed TA, which supports using in house expertise via the Project Director, and selecting experts to work with the authorizer to implement best practices (e177, e215, e226, e227).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan

1. The Secretary considers the quality of the management plan for the proposed project. In determining the quality of the management plan for the proposed project, the Secretary considers:

Reader's Score: 14

Sub

1. The adequacy of the management plan to achieve the objectives of the proposed project on time and within budget, including clearly defined responsibilities, timelines, and milestones for accomplishing project tasks (up to 10 points)

Strengths:

The proposed Management Plan is well-developed and includes clear timelines and milestones that are detailed, realistic and appropriate for the objectives (e69, e70). The Budget Narrative is aligned with the management of the grant, and provides adequate resources, including breakout out time commitments of key personnel, (e74), five-year allocations by category (e213, e214,) breakout out of direct costs (e214), technical assistance personnel (e215), administrative (e216) in both percentage and actual (e215-e219).

The plan includes a position (Principal Investigator) that is already in place with significant experience, who will monitor external partners, including creating and monitoring MOU's detailing the duration, scope, responsibilities of each party and fees. Performance measures will be included in each MOU, and SE will have regular check-in meetings (e71, e72e73, e177,179).

Sub

Other key project personnel have demonstrated qualifications in both the SE and the Lead TA provider Embark (e71, e72, e81, e82, e85). The Renewal Criteria and Guidance Report exemplar reflects the applicant's previous high-quality work with the authorizer, use of best practice resources, data analysis, and development of recommendations (e97-e176).

Letters of support indicate strong support in applicant administering the CSP subgrantee program and TA, including two charter schools currently receiving the CSP subgrant under another SE that would be administered under this SE (e86- e90).

Weaknesses:

Although the applicant discusses a continuous feedback loop, detail is lacking on how the applicant will process the feedback to incorporate the stakeholder input (e74).

Reader's Score: 9

2. The adequacy of procedures for ensuring feedback and continuous improvement in the operation of the proposed project (up to 3 points)

Strengths:

The application contains strong evidence of procedures to ensure feedback and continuous improvement in the operation of the proposed project. The applicant states that they will seek input from at least 500 charter school parents and community members over the five-year grant period and conduct in person, in-depth interviews with a representative sample of 50 charter school parents to dive more deeply into their experiences and better understand the findings of the telephone surveys (e67, e68). This represents a significant pool of stakeholder feedback, that should be invaluable in informing the work. Because the applicant has extensive experience using data collected by stakeholder surveys and focus groups to inform and improve their work, including telephonic, scientific surveys, statewide online survey and focus groups it lends credence that this work will be done in a meaningful way. In addition, they plan to use their private grant dollars to continue this work by conducting in person focus groups and telephone surveys (e67, e179).

Findings from community input will inform decisions and adjust the program offering, such as preference points, how they communicate with parents about the purpose and availability of charter schools, and how to support current schools to make desired improvements. Findings will be published on CSP website (e68). The Advisory Committee Activity and Timeline outlined in table is sufficient (e68, e180).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 3

3. The extent to which the time commitments of the project director and principal investigator and other key project personnel are appropriate and adequate to meet the objectives of the proposed project.

Sub

Strengths:

Given the expertise and qualifications of the key personnel, identified as the Project Director, and Principal Investigator, they have allocated adequate time to the project to meet the objectives of the proposal (e214, e215). The position descriptions related to the grant are detailed and appropriate (e217). An example is the job description for the CSP Coordinator, which will be a full-time position dedicated to supporting the grant's program and implementation, understands the role responsibilities and is comprehensive (e216, e206-210).

In allocating time by the key personnel, it was smart to have increased time at the beginning and end of the grant to account for startup and initial implementation in year 1 and closeouts, and finalizing all of the subgrants in year 5 (e215).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 2

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority 1 - Competitive Preference Priority 1

- 1. At Least One Authorized Public Chartering Agency Other than a Local Educational Agency, or an Appeals Process. (0 to 1 points)**

To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that it is located in a State that--

(a) Allows at least one entity that is not a local educational agency (LEA) to be an authorized public chartering agency for developers seeking to open a charter school in the State; or

(b) In the case of a State in which LEAs are the only authorized public chartering agencies, the State has an appeals process for the denial of an application for a charter school.

Strengths:

MS has a single charter school board authorizer that is not an LEA (e17) which meets the priority of at least one entity that is not a local educational LEA.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 1

Competitive Preference Priority 2 - Competitive Preference Priority 2

- 1. To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that the State in which it is located ensures equitable financing, as compared to traditional public schools, for charter schools and students in a prompt manner. (up to 2 points)**

Strengths:

As provided by law, charter schools receive access to all of the same operating dollars as traditional public schools. This includes funding under the MS Adequate Education Program, MS state funding formula for public schools, state categorical aid programs; local funding through ad valorem taxes; and federal funding for public schools as administered by MBE (e17).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 2

Competitive Preference Priority 3 - Competitive Preference Priority 3

1. **To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that the State in which it is located uses best practices from charter schools to help improve struggling schools and LEAs. (up to 1 points)**

Strengths:

No strengths noted.

Weaknesses:

Application states that MS is unable to meet or carry out this priority (e17).

Reader's Score: 0

Competitive Preference Priority 4 - Competitive Preference Priority 4

1. **To be eligible to receive points under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate the extent to which the State in which it is located provides charter schools one or more of the following: (up to 3 points)**

- a) **Funding for facilities**
- b) **Assistance with facilities acquisition**
- c) **Access to public facilities**
- d) **The ability to share in bonds or mill levies**
- e) **The right of first refusal to purchase public school buildings**
- f) **Low- or no-cost leasing privileges.**

Strengths:

The State law provides for enhanced facility funding and access. The applicant addresses a, c, e, and f:

- Charter schools are eligible for all state funding for the construction of school facilities (e17, e18).
- Charter schools have access to Educational Facilities Revolving Loan fund on equal basis to traditional public school districts (e17).
- Conversion charter school retain right to lease original facility (e17, e18).
- Charter schools gave the right of first refusal to purchase or lease at or below fair market value, including a variety of buildings such as school district buildings, public university or community college buildings or other public, for

profit or not for profit entities(e18).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 3

Competitive Preference Priority 5 - Competitive Preference Priority 5

- 1. To be eligible to receive points under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate the extent to which it supports charter schools that serve at-risk students through activities such as dropout prevention, dropout recovery, or comprehensive career counseling services. (up to 3 points)**

Strengths:

Because MS currently does not currently have any charter high schools, they are not able to demonstrate enhanced support to charter school high school activities that focus on drop out recovery or career counseling. Instead, they have indicated that through their subgrant process, they will be providing competitive preference to high school applicants serving high risk students, and these applications will be prioritized. (e18, e36, e38). Furthermore, to qualify for the full 10 competitive preference points for high schools, the charter high school would need to include competency-based or drop-out prevention focus, and provide students a pathway to a diploma (e39). This aligns with the CSP priority, and highly supports efforts to expand access and serve at-risk students.

MS law already states that charter school demographics must reflect to a high degree the underserved composition of the traditional school district in which they are located (e36, e37) and charter schools are most likely to locate in D or F rated school districts, given the authorizer is able to authorize in those districts without the LEA denying the charter application, which indicates that they will be serving At-Risk students (e37).

Charter school applicants that propose special models for serve at risk students will receive 6 preference points in the subgrantee award application (e39), In the rural area of the Delta, families must move 20 or more miles to find a district that is A or B rated. Rural school applications receive competitive preference points (e27, e38). The applicant was successful in demonstrating both the need and demand in their state and illustrating that the majority of existing and new charter schools founded in the state would serve at risk students.

The TA plan includes specialized support for high school founding groups for authorization -oriented support (e42), as well as additional TA during the state charter RFP process and post award, including with a specialized TA provider for high schools (e46). This demonstrates a focus on serving the students that would most benefit from dropout prevention, dropout recovery or comprehensive counseling services.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 3

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/19/2022 02:08 PM

Status: Submitted

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Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Mississippi First, Inc. (S282A220001)

Reader #1: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of Project Design		
1. Quality of Project Design	35	30
Sub Total	35	30
Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants		
Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants		
1. Subgrant Applicants	15	14
Sub Total	15	14
State Plan		
State Plan		
1. State Plan	35	34
Sub Total	35	34
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Management Plan		
1. Management Plan	15	14
Sub Total	15	14
Priority Questions		
Competitive Preference Priority 1		
Competitive Preference Priority 1		
1. CPP1	1	1
Sub Total	1	1
Competitive Preference Priority 2		
Competitive Preference Priority 2		
1. CPP2	2	2
Sub Total	2	2
Competitive Preference Priority 3		
Competitive Preference Priority 3		
1. CPP3	1	0
Sub Total	1	0
Competitive Preference Priority 4		
Competitive Preference Priority 4		
1. CPP4	3	3

	Sub Total	3	3
Competitive Preference Priority 5			
Competitive Preference Priority 5			
1. CPP5		3	3
	Sub Total	3	3
	Total	110	101

Technical Review Form

Panel #1 - State Entities Panel - 1: 84.282A

Reader #1: *****

Applicant: Mississippi First, Inc. (S282A220001)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of Project Design

1. The Secretary considers the quality of the design of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers:

Reader's Score: 30

Sub

1. The extent to which the proposed project demonstrates a rationale; (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The application provides strong rationales for the proposed project and an included logic model that discusses program details, partnerships and subgrants, and outputs and outcomes (pg.e177). The rationale listed in support for this proposal is that because Mississippi is a small rural state, it is very difficult to grow charter school using philanthropic funds. This state struggles to attract national respect, investments and attention that other states use to grow their educational charter school communities (pg. e20). Another rationale that was given is that because students reached the national average in reading and math a national funder finally saw interest in educational investment within the state and help them grow their charter schools (pg. e20). The funding they will receive from the philanthropy organization is to be used for charter school infrastructure and re-incubation of existing schools, facilities and bridge loans it gives no funds for charter school start up grants, which they plan to utilize the CSP grant for (pg. e20).

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses

Reader's Score: 5

2. The extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the project and will produce quantitative and qualitative data to the extent possible; and (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The application included well-developed, objective performance measures related to the project's intended outcomes. The Performance Measures and activities are listed throughout the section and along with the methods of evaluation are measurable and differentiated by qualitative and quantitative such as measuring the amount of info sessions held and supporting external partners in requests for proposal processes, which makes a strong argument in support of meeting this goal (pg. e24).

Sub

Weaknesses:

This applicant could include a list of more evidence detailing how they will ensure they meet these performance measurements of increasing the number of authorized charter schools. (pg. e24)

Reader's Score: 4

3. The ambitiousness of the State entity's objectives for the quality charter school program carried out under the CSP State Entities program (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

Doubling the states number of approved charter school is a goal that is ambitious but can be attainable. With the state being slow to authorize new schools in response to lack of quality applicants, they plan to work with the philanthropic organization on developing new charter school leaders, through outreach efforts, fellowships and providing support through use of CSP funds over a 5-year span leading to the ambitiousness of this applicant CSP plan (pg. e26).

Weaknesses:

This method can imply a bias of the leaders that they collaborate with may automatically receive funds due to the limited number of qualified applicants.

Reader's Score: 4

4. The extent to which the number of subgrant awards anticipated for each grant project year is supported by evidence of demand and need, and the proposed average subgrant award amount is supported by evidence of the need of applicants (up to 20 points)

Strengths:

The evidence of demand for the number of subgrant awards proposed along with the proposed award amount was well developed in the application. Based on Jackson and the Delta families having access to schools that are A- or B- rated this requires funds for new or replicating charter schools which demonstrates a need of applicants. Past CSP grantees used 300,000 worth of funds for sub grants which is how the amount used was agreed upon (pg. e27). Families in the Delta do not have access to schools that are A- or B- and would require a move of more than 20 miles to find a district school (pg. e27). Families are demanding more quality schools (pg. e26-27) which meets the needs of this requirement.

Weaknesses:

This applicant could use more detail providing evidence of the accuracy of the subgrants amount needed to ensure it will not exceed what is appropriated (pg. e28). Amounts used in the past could be relevant or not enough for to meet the current needs of the schools.

Reader's Score: 17

Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants - Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants

1. The likelihood that the eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the program will meet the State entity's objectives and improve educational results for students.

Strengths:

The applicant made a strong case for the likelihood that eligible subgrantees would meet the objectives outlined in this application. Based on Jackson and the Delta families having access to schools that are A- or B- rated this requires funds for new or replicating charter schools (pg. e27). Families in the Delta do not have access to schools that are A- or B- and would require a move of more than 20 miles to find a district school (pg. e27). Families are demanding more quality schools (pg. e26-27). Mississippi First will be marketing subgrants to existing schools within MCSAB personally via phone calls and will continue to work with schools until they are eligible to receive funds (pg. e28-29). This proposal discusses their marketing and follow up plan to ensure subgrant applicants are eligible by utilizing the applicants that are found to be of quality through the MCSAB screening process (pg. e29). Even if schools are not authorized Mississippi First will allow them to apply for the subgrant while continue to work with them on their authorization process (pg. e42). This applicant has met the need of this requirement with the evidence stated.

Weaknesses:

With no pipeline existing and the state currently struggling to produce qualified applicants it will be difficult to get qualified applicants for subgrants that are able to improve educational results for students.

Reader's Score: 14

State Plan - State Plan

1. The State entity's plan to--

Reader's Score: 34

Sub

1. Adequately monitor the eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the State entity's program; (up to 10 points)

Strengths:

The application presented a well-developed plan to adequately monitor eligible subgrant applicants. Adequate monitoring for this applicant involves training for sub grantees to complete in order to receive funds that includes discussion of allowable use of funds to ensure clear guidance and support (pg. e46-47). In order to drawdown Mississippi First must approve the budget and grantees can make amendments throughout the grant life cycle (pg. e47). The drawdown process is very detailed and layered thus providing a continual check and balance to ensure fiscal responsibility (pg. e47-49). This speaks to the monitoring of funds from Mississippi First which meets the need of adequate monitoring.

Weaknesses:

This applicant could utilize more evidence that will decrease the layers that grantees will have to constantly submit budgets for in order to release funds which may conflict with the needs of the flow of business.

Reader's Score: 9

2. Work with the authorized public chartering agencies involved to avoid duplication of work for the charter schools and authorized public chartering agencies; (up to 5 points)

Sub

Strengths:

The applicant adequately developed a plan to avoid duplication of work by working with the authorizer. To avoid duplication, Mississippi First is looking for ways to streamline the documentation that schools submit for authorization by being very specific when asking for documentation that may have already been submitted (pg. e56). They plan to minimize the amount of request for information schools may have to submit, thus streamlining the process of providing information for authorization.

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 5

3. Provide technical assistance and support for--

- i. The eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the State entity's program; and**
- ii. Quality authorizing efforts in the State; (up to 10 points)**

Strengths:

Mississippi First has created a dynamically developed plan of support for enrollment and recruitment for schools that includes providing professional developments and feedback around recruitment plans (pg. e57). They will also provide ongoing support around retention and reducing the overuse exclusionary discipline practices through an external request process for quality provider and webinars (pg. e57). Mississippi First will work with partner organizations so that new charter schools will receive all state funds they qualify for and that deadlines for state and federal funding will not be missed (pg. e58-59). Mississippi First evaluates schools on an annual basis that measures operational, academic and financial performance, this ensures quality authorizing for students that will increase their academic success (p.e60)

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 10

4. The State entity's plan to solicit and consider input from parents and other members of the community on the implementation and operation of charter schools in the State; and (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The applicant presented a fully developed plan to engage parents and the community in the implementation and operation of the charter schools. Parent and community involvement involves using telephonic surveys that Mississippi First will conduct and stakeholder satisfaction surveys from over 500 parents and community members in FY23, 25 and 27. In FY 24 and 26 they will do in person focus groups of 50 parents to get an in-depth analysis of their experiences and telephone response. A parent and Community advisory committee will also be created to ensure they always hear the voice of the population they serve (pg. e67-68). The findings and reflections will be used to evaluate and influence decisions that will be made from Mississippi First. This plan addresses how parents and the community will impact the operation of new charter schools.

Weaknesses:

No known weaknesses.

Sub

Reader's Score: 5

- 5. The degree of flexibility afforded by the State's charter school law and how the State entity will work to maximize the flexibility provided to charter schools under such law. (up to 5 points)**

Strengths:

Mississippi First has proposed several strong projects to maximize the flexibility of charter school law, including work to establish a financial regulatory framework that respects charter autonomy, work to review the performance framework to identify improvements, work to clarify what constitutes a notice of concern or breach so that decision-making will not be arbitrary, and work to evaluate the authorizer on standards including respecting charter schools' autonomy (pg. e68).

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 5

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan

- 1. The Secretary considers the quality of the management plan for the proposed project. In determining the quality of the management plan for the proposed project, the Secretary considers:**

Reader's Score: 14

Sub

- 1. The adequacy of the management plan to achieve the objectives of the proposed project on time and within budget, including clearly defined responsibilities, timelines, and milestones for accomplishing project tasks (up to 10 points)**

Strengths:

This applicant provided a full developed management plan, including a list of identified Staff with years of experience as noted in their resume, for the roles they are in, with a direct history of their qualifications. The timeline provided that include attainable milestones (such as a post evaluation technical assistance to authorizer and implementing the advisory council) and the responsible parties involved, is attainable and sustainable for the grant applied (pg. e69-72).

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 10

- 2. The adequacy of procedures for ensuring feedback and continuous improvement in the operation of the proposed project (up to 3 points)**

Sub

Strengths:

To ensure feedback and continuous improvement, similar to the parent and stakeholder survey, they will utilize (parent, stakeholder, community, provider, authorizer, etc.) satisfaction surveys and meeting feedback. The feedback from these evaluations will contribute to key decision making for TA and to ensure program fidelity (pg. e73-74). Overall, the applications presents a fully developed procedures to ensure feedback for continuous improvement.

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 3

- 3. The extent to which the time commitments of the project director and principal investigator and other key project personnel are appropriate and adequate to meet the objectives of the proposed project.**

Strengths:

Time commitment of the staff appropriated will spend at least 25% of their time on grant activity using the CSP funds, the other time will be allocated using other funding sources in order to meet the objectives of the proposed project (pg. e74).

Weaknesses:

The applicant key personnel breakdown is not as descriptive as it could be, more evidence is needed in regarding tasks assignment to ensure clarity.

Reader's Score: 1

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority 1 - Competitive Preference Priority 1

- 1. At Least One Authorized Public Chartering Agency Other than a Local Educational Agency, or an Appeals Process. (0 to 1 points)**

To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that it is located in a State that--

- (a) Allows at least one entity that is not a local educational agency (LEA) to be an authorized public chartering agency for developers seeking to open a charter school in the State; or**
- (b) In the case of a State in which LEAs are the only authorized public chartering agencies, the State has an appeals process for the denial of an application for a charter school.**

Strengths:

Mississippi has a single independent authorizer that can authorize in any district, which they meet priority part A. (pg. e17)

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 1

Competitive Preference Priority 2 - Competitive Preference Priority 2

1. To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that the State in which it is located ensures equitable financing, as compared to traditional public schools, for charter schools and students in a prompt manner. (up to 2 points)

Strengths:

The applicant fully develops how the state ensures equitable financing for charter schools. Charter schools receive access to all funding traditional public schools receive, this includes all state dollars and federal (pg. e17) which will ensure that all schools have equitable financing.

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 2

Competitive Preference Priority 3 - Competitive Preference Priority 3

1. To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that the State in which it is located uses best practices from charter schools to help improve struggling schools and LEAs. (up to 1 points)

Strengths:

No strengths noted.

Weaknesses:

Does not meet this requirement and is not competing for this priority.

Reader's Score: 0

Competitive Preference Priority 4 - Competitive Preference Priority 4

1. To be eligible to receive points under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate the extent to which the State in which it is located provides charter schools one or more of the following: (up to 3 points)

- a) Funding for facilities
- b) Assistance with facilities acquisition
- c) Access to public facilities
- d) The ability to share in bonds or mill levies
- e) The right of first refusal to purchase public school buildings
- f) Low- or no-cost leasing privileges.

Strengths:

The application fully demonstrates how the state supports charter schools with facilities. Charter schools have access to state facilities and a variety of buildings for lease at or below fair market value. They are also eligible for state funding for the construction of school facilities including the educational facilities revolving loan fund, meeting a, e, f, and c. (pg. e18)

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 3

Competitive Preference Priority 5 - Competitive Preference Priority 5

- 1. To be eligible to receive points under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate the extent to which it supports charter schools that serve at-risk students through activities such as dropout prevention, dropout recovery, or comprehensive career counseling services. (up to 3 points)**

Strengths:

Subgrants priorities will be given to school models that service at risk students and high schools with models serving at risk students (pg. e18) These schools will address dropout prevention and credit recovery programs for their at risk students. Overall, the applicant fully demonstrates how it will support at-risk students.

Weaknesses:

No found weaknesses.

Reader's Score: 3

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/19/2022 04:45 PM

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 08/19/2022 09:58 AM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Mississippi First, Inc. (S282A220001)

Reader #2: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of Project Design		
1. Quality of Project Design	35	26
Sub Total	35	26
Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants		
Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants		
1. Subgrant Applicants	15	13
Sub Total	15	13
State Plan		
State Plan		
1. State Plan	35	32
Sub Total	35	32
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Management Plan		
1. Management Plan	15	14
Sub Total	15	14
Priority Questions		
Competitive Preference Priority 1		
Competitive Preference Priority 1		
1. CPP1	1	1
Sub Total	1	1
Competitive Preference Priority 2		
Competitive Preference Priority 2		
1. CPP2	2	1
Sub Total	2	1
Competitive Preference Priority 3		
Competitive Preference Priority 3		
1. CPP3	1	0
Sub Total	1	0
Competitive Preference Priority 4		
Competitive Preference Priority 4		
1. CPP4	3	3

	Sub Total	3	3
Competitive Preference Priority 5			
Competitive Preference Priority 5			
1. CPP5		3	3
	Sub Total	3	3
	Total	110	93

Technical Review Form

Panel #1 - State Entities Panel - 1: 84.282A

Reader #2: *****

Applicant: Mississippi First, Inc. (S282A220001)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of Project Design

1. The Secretary considers the quality of the design of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers:

Reader's Score: 26

Sub

1. The extent to which the proposed project demonstrates a rationale; (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

Overall, the applicant's proposed project demonstrates a clear and well-supported rationale for the project. The applicant clearly articulates the need for additional charter schools, its relevant expertise needed to support the proposed grant program, and a plan for developing a pipeline of strong subgrantees that will open schools that will support at-risk students.

- The applicant clearly articulates how it will support the opening of new charter schools. In particular, the applicant notes that in addition to more general technical assistance and informational sessions, it plans to work with a local organization, Embark, to provide "intense support" (e19) to a select group of 3-5 prospective subgrantees to ensure they have strong authorizing applications.
- The applicant clearly outlines its ability to develop and strengthen a cohesive system that supports new and replicated charter schools, including its long history developing and improving the state's charter laws (e19) and newly increased capacity provided by a private [REDACTED] grant (e20). This, in conjunction with CSP funds, will allow the applicant to support its planned activities.
- The applicant demonstrates a clear plan to support charter schools in LEAs with a significant number of ESSA identified schools as well as struggling schools (via turnaround schools) through a competitive priority in its subgrant activities, noting that both types of would receive an additional 6 priority point in its subgrant application (e39). Additionally, as it relates to LEAs with identified schools, the applicant states that the state's current charter laws provide further priority because "our authorizer can approve schools in D- or F-rated districts without the consent of the local educational agency" (e22).
- The applicant identifies a clear area of concern for both charters and traditional public schools—teacher shortages—as a key leverage point to foster the collaboration between the sectors. The applicant also has extensive experience working with traditional public schools and has a privately funded initiative (Keys to the Classroom) ready to launch to support these efforts (e23-4). Finding this area of common interest is particularly important given that traditional LEAs have historically view charters as "adversaries" (e23).

Weaknesses:

Despite the applicant's generally strong plan, their logic model lacked any specifically cited research and the noted fraught relationship with the state's authorizing entity could limit its ability to effectively partner with them, as would be required at the SE entity.

- The applicant includes a clear logic model (e177-183) that outlines its planned activities and connected

Sub

relevant outcomes; however, there is no specific research cited in support of this logic model.

- The applicant notes that in addition to providing support to potential grantees, it plans to provide oversight and technical assistance to the state's authorizer, MCSAB. While the applicant outlines a clear plan for how it plans to support MCSAB, throughout this plan the applicant repeatedly criticizes the current practices of MCSAB (e61-6) including noting that their previous efforts to improve these practices were not heeded including "Despite making our best case for accelerating the renewal timeline for schools, we were unsuccessful in convincing the MCSAB that they could institute voluntary deadlines before February 1...MCSAB also did not include plans and procedures to support families in applying for and enrolling in other schools" (e64). This acrimonious history between the applicant and MCSAB could limit the applicant's effectiveness in supporting the opening of new charter schools through oversight and TA for the state's authorizer.

Reader's Score: 4

2. The extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the project and will produce quantitative and qualitative data to the extent possible; and (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The applicant has articulated clear objective performance measures that are directly related to the outcomes of the project, including performance measures that appropriately build on each other to ensure progress over the course of the grant period.

- The applicant has more than one performance measure for each objective, which are directly related to the intended outcomes of the project, as cited in Table 1 (e24-5), which allow these measures to ensure the success of all objectives. In particular, Performance Measure 1 for Objective 3 ensures that all schools that receive subgrants will be directly contributing to priority areas for growth in the state's charter sector (e25), which according to its subgrant outline includes high schools, rural schools, turnaround schools, schools focused on at-risk students, and schools located in districts with large numbers of ESSA identified schools.
- Importantly, the performance measures within many of the objectives build on each other, allowing the results of one performance measure work as a barometer for future performance measures. For example, Objective 2 includes two interim performance measures (awarding 2-3 subgrants annual and 90% annual spend down) that can indicate whether the applicant is on track to meet its longer-term goals under this objective (awarding 12 total grants and 100% spenddown by FY27) (e24).
- The applicant includes both quantitative and qualitative measures across all of its four objectives.

Weaknesses:

While all of the applicants' objectives have related performance measures, multiple activities under Objective 2 have not related performance measures. This is particularly concerning for Activity 2.4 "Consider input of parents and community members" as none of the other performance measures within this objective are directly, or even indirectly, related to this activity (e180). As a result, this increases the likelihood that the applicant will not hold itself accountable to ensuring that the input of the communities and parents are taken into perspective, which is key to the long-term success (and potentially short-term success) of any new charters that open under this grant.

Reader's Score: 4

3. The ambitiousness of the State entity's objectives for the quality charter school program carried out under the CSP State Entities program (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

Overall, the applicant presents a strong argument for both the ambitiousness and achievability of the program objectives by articulating its plan to open a significant number of schools over the grant period as well as the demand for new schools and its support plan for new subgrantees.

- The applicant clearly articulates how its objectives around subgrants and increasing the size of the charter

Sub

sector are both ambitious and achievable. They show the ambitiousness by indicating that achieving their goal would amount to doubling the number of schools authorized each year from 1 to 2 (e25).

- Additionally, they show that this goal is still achievable by connecting the current slow pace of charter growth to a lack of qualified applicants (e26), while making increasing the number and quality of applicants the focus of their planned activities via outreach, technical assistance, and intensive supports (e56-9). This also applies to how the applicant's objective around issuing 12 subgrants will be achieved via these same planned support services.
- The applicant makes clear that its objective around encouraging charter-district collaboration is ambitious given the description that districts view charters as "adversaries" (e23) as well as noting that this would be the "first such effort" at this collaboration. The applicant also notes their experience working with traditional public schools in other policy areas, which has the potential to increase the achievability of this objective.

Weaknesses:

The applicant doesn't make an effective case that their charter-district collaboration is, in fact, an achievable goal. While they have wisely identified an issue with common cause for charters and district schools, teacher shortage (e26), they don't make any further indication that district schools would be willing to participate in such activities, such as through proactive outreach to gauge districts' interest.

Reader's Score: 4

4. The extent to which the number of subgrant awards anticipated for each grant project year is supported by evidence of demand and need, and the proposed average subgrant award amount is supported by evidence of the need of applicants (up to 20 points)

Strengths:

The applicant makes a generally strong case for the demand and need for the number of subgrants, by citing the large number of low-rated schools in both urban and rural areas in the state, and the amount of each subgrant, by citing the unique cost associated with the types of schools they plan to support with subgrant and the lack of access to philanthropic and state funding prior to opening.

- The applicant has two main compelling points when outlining the case for the demand for new charter schools in Mississippi. First, they note that parent support for existing charter schools is "extremely high" (e26), which they support by showing impressive results from a 2020 charter parent survey that indicates that nearly all parents surveyed felt charter schools are preparing students for college and would recommend their school to other parents. Additionally, they quite starkly outline the low ratings of traditional public schools in both Jackson and the Delta and state that an additional 2,750 seats in A and B schools would be needed to enable just one third of Jackson students access to an A- or B-rated school (e27).
- The applicant also makes two important points to support its plan to provide its subgrantees with the maximum grant [REDACTED] per year over five years by noting the low philanthropic capacity (including that the applicant's own philanthropic funds cannot be significantly invested in new schools) (e27-8), as well as a key statutory limitation in the state, which doesn't allow charters access to funding prior to opening (e28). The applicant further supports issuing the maximum grant award by referring to previous SE subgrantees, both of whom exhausted the full [REDACTED]0 per year (e28).
- The applicant also notes the additional costs associated with the specific types of schools it's focused on opening: rural schools, high schools, and those focused on at-risk students. In particular, they make a strong case for the additional costs associated with high schools, including state requirements and athletics (e46), and rural schools including a lack of local vendors and personnel costs (e39).

Weaknesses:

While the applicant makes a strong general case for the number and size of grants, the applicant fails to provide, in both cases, more specific calculations and/or methodology to support the specific number of schools and grant award amounts associated with this grant.

- One key indicator of demand for additional charter schools is waiting lists at existing charters. The

Sub

applicant says that all Mississippi charter schools are “fully or nearly fully enrolled, often with waiting lists at one or more grade levels” (e27), but this information is extremely vague. The applicant’s claims for demand could have been significantly bolstered by including numbers of schools fully enrolled as well as specific figures of existing waiting lists.

- While the applicant makes logical arguments for providing the maximum grant for each subgrantee, they provide very minimal details on the specific methodology and calculations that result in the need for this level of funding. In fact, the only calculation included shows that the plan to fund schools at approximately [REDACTED] per expected student (e28).

Reader's Score: 14

Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants - Quality of Eligible Subgrant Applicants

1. The likelihood that the eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the program will meet the State entity’s objectives and improve educational results for students.

Strengths:

Overall, the applicant provides thorough evidence that its subgrant processes will result in strong subgrantees that will support CSP SE program’s objective of improving educational results for students, including its planned support for potential grantees as they navigate the authorization process through its partner and strong application requirements that demonstrate need, community input, alignment with school-type priorities, and financial sustainability.

- **Timeline and Related Processes:** The applicant provides a very detailed description of its timeline and related processes as a part of its application. In addition to a table that provides an overview of the process (e40-1), the applicant provides a clear explanation for each step in the process (e41-3). As a part of the timeline explanation, the applicant clearly articulates who will be responsible for each part with a particular focus on the role of the applicant and its incubator/TA partner, Embark. For instance, in the “annual cycle eligible applicant TA” section, it both indicates what the applicant will do, “provide [subgrant applicants] the full subgrant application and offer them subgrant application TA through our CSP Coordinator,” (e42) and what the TA provides will do, “continue to provide authorization-oriented TA” (e42).
- **Publicizing Available Funds:** The applicant provides a detailed explanation of three ways that it will publicize the availability of CSP subgrants. Importantly, these strategies include targeting charter schools at three distinct phases of development: existing and recently authorized schools, schools seeking authorization in the next fiscal year, and potential developers of new schools (e28-30). By focusing on all areas of the charter development pipeline, the applicant can ensure that they are attracting a wide range of grantees. Additionally, the applicant is enlisting the help of two key partners in their outreach: the state’s authorizer and their incubation partner. These partnerships should provide additional support by helping to ensure the quality of subgrant applicants.
- **Assurances of School Quality:** The applicant makes a strong case that—in addition to the subgrant applicant process—existing state charter laws ensure that new charter schools in the state will need to be high quality to open and remain open, particularly around the area of academic performance and growth (e31-2).
- **Family and Community Engagement:** The applicant’s outlined subgrant application includes substantial opportunities for subgrants to outline specifically how they are including parent, family, and community voice in the development of any new charter, as well as ongoing parent and community engagement once a school is opened. Importantly, the subgrant application required potential subgrantees to answer 10 questions on this topic across six sections, helping to ensure that subgrantees are considering parent and community voice throughout its application, rather than relegating it to an isolated part of the grant and planning process.
- **Sustainability:** The applicant plans to require subgrantees to outline their plan financial sustainability plan beyond the end of the grant period (e35), which is critical to ensuring CSP funds are being awarded to schools that will have long-term viability. Beyond this, the applicant states that subgrantees will need to update their sustainability plan when they enter the final year of their CSP grant (e55).
- **Required Needs Assessments:** The applicant outlines extensive needs assessment requirements for subgrantees, which include local support for the school, projected enrollment, projected demographics, and impacts on segregation. Subgrant applicants are expected to not only complete the short sections within the main application but include substantial supplemental information in addendums to provide sufficient evidence of each needs assessments

(e35-7).

- **Transportation:** The subgrant application requires subgrant applicants to outline their transportation plan for both daily travel to and from school as well as for athletics and special events, including detailed budgets and projected ridership (e37-8). Additionally, the applicant notes that state law both requires a similar transportation plan and provides charter schools with the same access to transportation funding as traditional public schools (e38). Together these suggest that any schools funded via CSP subgrants via this applicant will have adequate transportation services for students.
- **Supporting Diverse School Models:** The applicant strongly supports the development of diverse school models by providing competitive points for subgrant applicants opening high schools (10 points); rural schools (8 points); and conversion schools, turnaround schools, schools for at-risk students and schools in LEAs with multiple CSI schools (6 points) (e38-40). The applicant also has a specific performance metric that 100% of subgrantees meet at least one competitive priority (which also included educator-led and community centered schools) (e25), which further ensures subgrants issued by this applicant will support diverse models.
- **Supporting Educator-Led and Community-Centered Schools:** The applicant adequately addresses the requirement they support the development of educator-led and community-centered charter model by providing 6 priority points for applicants that address this and uses the exact NIA language as a part of these requirements (e40). As noted above, the applicant aims to have 100% of its schools address at least one of their four competitive priorities (e25).
- **Review Process:** The applicant provides a detailed outline of its subgrant application review process. It describes how it will select reviewers—including ensuring reviewer diversity, as well as the various areas the reviewers will focus on (e43-5).

Weaknesses:

While the applicant generally demonstrates its ability to ensure high-quality subgrantees, they fail to adequately address the role of authorizers in ensuring school quality or provide specific criteria or rubrics it will use to evaluate subgrant applications.

- **Beyond aligning its subgrant application process with the authorizing process,** the applicant spends very little time outlining the role of the authorizer in the reviewing charter performance and operations. Instead, in the application the applicant casts doubt on the authorizer's ability to conduct its basic functions (e61-6).
- **While the applicant provides a detailed overview of the subgrant review process,** as noted above (e43-5), it does not include any information about a rubric or other specific criteria that will be used to assess applicants.

Reader's Score: 13

State Plan - State Plan

1. The State entity's plan to--

Reader's Score: 32

Sub

1. Adequately monitor the eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the State entity's program; (up to 10 points)

Strengths:

The applicant demonstrates its ability to monitor subgrantees through their clear monitoring processes in place for subgrantees including financial safeguards, monitoring timelines, and criteria for determining at-risk subgrantees. The applicant also has clear plans for tracking spending on students with disabilities and English Learners and monitoring transparency.

- **The applicant takes a proactive approach to monitoring its grantees by requiring all grantees complete CSP-specific training prior to any drawdowns in CSP funding (e46-7).**

Sub

- The applicant provides clear safeguards around the drawdown of funds via three levels of review via an accountant, the principal investigator, and the project directors (e48).
- The applicant provides a clear monitoring timeline (e51-2) that shows that monitoring will be both regular and timely. In particular, the applicant plans to provide quarterly monitoring for low-risk grantees, while instituting monthly or bi-monthly monitoring for higher-risk grantees (e49-50).
- The applicant provides clear descriptions of how it will determine if a grantee is “at-risk” and thus moved from a quarterly to monthly or bi-monthly monitoring meetings (e52-4).
- Two of the main people involved in the monitoring process already have extensive experience in grants management and with charter schools (e54, e71-2), but both will also complete all additional federally required trainings to ensure they have knowledge needed to monitor subgrantees.
- The applicant plans to require all subgrantees to indicate what funds will be used for specific needs of students with disabilities and English Learners (e54-5). Doing so will allow the applicant to easily track and monitor CSP spending for these student groups.
- The applicant adheres to transparency requirements, by planning to provide a twice annual report to CSP grantees to the state’s authorizer, while also publicly reporting corrective actions plans quarterly on their website (e55).
- The applicant thoroughly addresses funding sustainability as a part of its plan. In addition to requiring a sustainability plan in its initial subgrantee application (e35), sustainability will be a part of quarterly monitoring and applicants need to formally update their sustainability plan as they enter the final year of their grant (e55).

Weaknesses:

- The applicant notes that grantees will be put on a “corrective action plan” and be offered additional TA to address deficiencies identified via monitoring processes (e54) but provides no other details about this process.

Reader's Score: 9

2. Work with the authorized public chartering agencies involved to avoid duplication of work for the charter schools and authorized public chartering agencies; (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

- The applicant’s dedication to avoiding the duplication of work is comprehensive and is first noted in the description of its subgrant application, where they state that they will “rely as much as possible on existing sources of information for our CSP subgrant application” (e30).
- Additionally, the applicant plans to review existing reporting requirements of the state charter authorizer and Department of Education, to use these data for their own reporting needs prior to asking subgrantees for data. The applicant goes even further saying that it will even consolidate, re-format, or conduct additional analyses with existing data to limit the asks of their sub grantees (e56).
- As a part of its review of existing reporting, the applicant also plans to submit recommendations for streamlining these data collections to further reduce the burden on both CSP subgrantees and state agencies (e56).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

3. Provide technical assistance and support for--

- The eligible applicants receiving subgrants under the State entity’s program; and**
- Quality authorizing efforts in the State; (up to 10 points)**

Sub

Strengths:

The applicant clearly demonstrates that it will provide strong technical assistance and support for both subgrantees and the state authorizing activities, identifying key areas for support and plans to address each, while also demonstrating that it has the expertise to provide this assistance and/or will work with high-qualified partners in areas where they lack the appropriate content knowledge.

- The applicant notes that a large part of the charter authorizing process requires applicants to address recruitment and enrollment. As a part of its main grant activities, the applicant plans to provide direct technical assistance in successfully completing the authorization process, which will inherently include this area (e19, e41). Additionally, the applicant plans to develop a Mississippi-specific best practices guide to enrollment and recruitment for its grantees (e57).
- The applicant plans to hire an expert, via an RFP, to provide specific professional development and technical assistance around exclusionary discipline practices (e57). This plan demonstrates both the applicant's desire to address this issue, while simultaneously recognizing that it doesn't have the expertise internally to adequately address this issue on their own.
- In addition to the required areas of 3.i., the applicant provides a detailed explanation about how it will provide specific TA it plans to provide to both subgrantees and state agencies to ensure subgrantees are able to access state and federal funding through the SEA, a process that it notes has excluded charters in the past due to a lack of communication and other administrative barriers (e57-8).
- The applicant provides significant details, which showcase the applicant's expertise in this area, about specific areas where it would like to help the state authorizer improve its practices through technical assistance. For instance, the applicant states it will "offer the MCSAB the opportunity to hire an additional expert who can examine the proposed new [performance] framework and provide critique and substantive recommendations for how to solve identified problems" (e60).

Weaknesses:

While the applicant has a generally strong plan for technical assistance and support, they could have provided more detail around ensuring the enrollment of disadvantaged students and noted past problems working with the state authorizer, which could limit the impact of TA.

- The applicant mentions that its recruitment and enrollment documents will focus on barriers to enrollment for disadvantaged student groups (e57) but provides little detail about this.
- The applicant outlines numerous specific instances in the past where efforts to provide recommendation to the state's authorizer have gone unheeded (e60, e63-64), indicating a poor working relationship between the authorizer and the applicant, which could limit the effectiveness of any provided TA via CSP funds. However, to help mitigate this, the applicant is planning to provide funds for external, national experts to work with authorizer (e226-27).

Reader's Score: 8

4. The State entity's plan to solicit and consider input from parents and other members of the community on the implementation and operation of charter schools in the State; and (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The applicant has outlined robust plans to solicit input from various stakeholders to inform how it executes the activities proposed in this grant, including a variety of method for collecting input and specific timelines for publishing this feedback, which demonstrates a clear intention to incorporate feedback into grant activities.

- The applicant has a comprehensive, multi-modal community engagement plan in place, which will include surveys, focus groups, and an advisory committee (e67-8). Having these various ways to solicit community input will help ensure the applicants efforts reflect community needs. The applicant also provides a clear timeline for when each of these will be conducted and when these results will be published, as well as a list of ways in which it could use community input (e68).

Sub

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

5. The degree of flexibility afforded by the State's charter school law and how the State entity will work to maximize the flexibility provided to charter schools under such law. (up to 5 points)

Strengths:

The applicant has strong focus on ensuring the needed flexibility for charter schools, noting both its previous efforts that have resulted in state laws with considerable flexibility and specific plans to improve the ways in which these flexibilities are implemented via its state authorizer.

- The applicant outlines in its descriptions of its plans for TA for the states' authorizer and other agencies about how it plans to work to maximize the flexibility for charter schools through the improvement of processes and frameworks, including new finance regulations and clear and consistent performance metrics (e58-9, e60-2). It also notes that the state's law is modeled on the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' model law (e16) and gives charter schools wide flexibility, with autonomy from state and district policies "unless made specifically applicable to charter schools" (e32).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan

1. The Secretary considers the quality of the management plan for the proposed project. In determining the quality of the management plan for the proposed project, the Secretary considers:

Reader's Score: 14

Sub

1. The adequacy of the management plan to achieve the objectives of the proposed project on time and within budget, including clearly defined responsibilities, timelines, and milestones for accomplishing project tasks (up to 10 points)

Strengths:

The applicant demonstrates its ability to manage all of the outlined grant activities through detailed information about its timelines, external monitoring, aligned budget, and qualified staff, while also providing outside references that vouch for the applicants' expertise and capacity.

- The applicant provides a clear timeline, including the responsible parties for each action item (e70), which also refers to more detailed timelines cited earlier in the application (Tables 3-5), as needed.
- The applicant clearly outlines the strong qualifications of the existing program staff, including the Project Director who has decades of experience in charter school policy (e71). In addition to being highly qualified, the both the PI and the Lead External TA Provider are native to Mississippi, providing them a strong sense of the needs of the local community (e71-2).
- The applicant provides a detailed explanation of the plan to monitor its various external partners, noting who will be responsible at the organization to manage these relationships, where specific performance measures

Sub

will be outlined, and the frequency of check-ins with external partners (e72-3).

- The budget narrative (e212-e229) is clearly aligned with the applicants plan as described throughout the application. For example, each of the authorizer TA activities outlined in section c.3.ii. are each similarly described in the budget narrative (e226-28), with cost appropriately front loaded in the beginning of the grant period so that improvements to the authorizer are happening quickly, while monitoring and evaluations happen later in the grant. Each section of the budget has similar narrative explanations with appropriate year-by-year breakdowns.
- Letters of support—including from the two schools currently receiving SE subgrants in the state—provide external validation that the applicant has the expertise and capacity to effectively manage this project and grant funds (e86-94).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 10

2. The adequacy of procedures for ensuring feedback and continuous improvement in the operation of the proposed project (up to 3 points)

Strengths:

The applicant provides a specific list of the stakeholders from whom they will solicit feedback “developers, eligible applicants, subgrantees, COP members, Embark, TA providers, the authorizer, and parents and community advisory members” (e73) as well as how it will solicit this feedback—post meeting surveys, annual surveys, and feedback specific email address (e73).

Weaknesses:

While the applicant provides clear processes for soliciting feedback from all involved stakeholders, they fail to provide sufficient detail of its larger processes involved in the continuous improvement cycle, including how the applicant plans to consider and implement any collected feedback. The applicant provides a list of potential areas for the use of feedback (e74) but doesn't go as far as providing a detailed plan for how this feedback will or could be implemented.

Reader's Score: 2

3. The extent to which the time commitments of the project director and principal investigator and other key project personnel are appropriate and adequate to meet the objectives of the proposed project.

Strengths:

The applicant provides adequate information via its budget narrative and job description of the CSP coordinator to show that its proposed time commitments are both appropriate and adequate to meet all grant objectives.

- The applicant outlines the time commitments for the three main staff members that will be responsible for administering the grant activities in a clear table (e74). These time commitments seem adequate and appropriate, with the CSP Coordinator using the nearly all of their time focused on this grant, with the PI and Project director each providing proportionately less time on the grant. The applicant includes clear duties assigned to the CSP coordinator in the proposed job description, which provides additional detail about how personnel will execute the proposed project (e206-10). The applicant also wisely increase the time for the PD and PI in the final year of the grant given the increased reporting for the final year, as well as potential reapplication for an additional SE grant.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Sub

Reader's Score: 2

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority 1 - Competitive Preference Priority 1

1. **At Least One Authorized Public Chartering Agency Other than a Local Educational Agency, or an Appeals Process.**
(0 to 1 points)

To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that it is located in a State that--

(a) Allows at least one entity that is not a local educational agency (LEA) to be an authorized public chartering agency for developers seeking to open a charter school in the State; or

(b) In the case of a State in which LEAs are the only authorized public chartering agencies, the State has an appeals process for the denial of an application for a charter school.

Strengths:

- The agency in charge of authorizing charter schools in Mississippi is a state board and not a LEA (e17), therefore it meets requirement (a) of this competitive priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant notes that "Per law, it may authorize schools in any school district and may do so in D- or F-rated school districts without the blessing of the relevant traditional public school district," (e17) which suggests that LEAs may be able to stop charter schools from being authorized in A-C rated districts. This may limit the autonomy of the state authorizer, though the applicant does not elaborate on this. However, it's not clear if this will actually have a substantial impact for this grant given that the applicant is focused on providing subgrants for opening schools in low-rated districts and the application still meets this CPP.

Reader's Score: 1

Competitive Preference Priority 2 - Competitive Preference Priority 2

1. **To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that the State in which it is located ensures equitable financing, as compared to traditional public schools, for charter schools and students in a prompt manner. (up to 2 points)**

Strengths:

- The applicant notes that charter schools have the same level of access to both state and local funding under state law (e17), including transportation (e37).
- As noted below, the applicant notes that charters authorized in the state are losing access to funds due to miscommunication and errors in communication (e58). However, the applicant has indicated that as a part of the grant activities, it plans to provide TA to subgrantees to reduce the impact of this identified problem in future years.

Weaknesses:

Despite have equitable access to funding under state law, the applicant notes that miscommunications and "erroneous information" between newly authorized schools, the state authorizer, and the SEA have resulted in schools missing deadlines to qualify for state funding, "causing those schools to receive less funding" (e58), suggesting that there are de facto inequities in funding despite equity being enshrined in state law, while also suggesting that equitable funding is not happening in a prompt manner, as required by this competitive preference priority.

Reader's Score: 1

Competitive Preference Priority 3 - Competitive Preference Priority 3

- 1. To meet this priority, an applicant must demonstrate that the State in which it is located uses best practices from charter schools to help improve struggling schools and LEAs. (up to 1 points)**

Strengths:

The applicant does not address this competitive preference priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not address this competitive preference priority.

Reader's Score: 0

Competitive Preference Priority 4 - Competitive Preference Priority 4

- 1. To be eligible to receive points under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate the extent to which the State in which it is located provides charter schools one or more of the following: (up to 3 points)**

- a) **Funding for facilities**
- b) **Assistance with facilities acquisition**
- c) **Access to public facilities**
- d) **The ability to share in bonds or mill levies**
- e) **The right of first refusal to purchase public school buildings**
- f) **Low- or no-cost leasing privileges.**

Strengths:

The application provides a fully developed discussion of how the state provides several facilities-related supports to charter schools.

- The applicant notes that it was integral in the passage and updating of the state's charter school laws (e16), which provide equal access to "construction of school facilities, including the new Educational Facilities Revolving Loan Fund" (e17); conversion schools the ability to retain an existing lease; first right of refusal to public school buildings; and below-market lease options including those owned by schools districts and public colleges, which addresses a, c, e, and f above.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 3

Competitive Preference Priority 5 - Competitive Preference Priority 5

1. To be eligible to receive points under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate the extent to which it supports charter schools that serve at-risk students through activities such as dropout prevention, dropout recovery, or comprehensive career counseling services. (up to 3 points)

Strengths:

The applicant clearly demonstrates that it will support the development of charter schools that support at-risk students through its subgrant application questions, subgrant competitive priorities, the overall grant performance metrics, and the state's charter law.

- As noted earlier, the applicant plans to provide competitive priority for schools that serve at-risk students, including drop-out prevention and recovery, as well as in LEAs that have multiple CSI schools (e39).
- The applicant is also focused on supporting the development of charter high schools and charter schools in rural areas, both identified as key areas of need in the state: the state currently has zero charter high schools (e39)—those most likely to be dropout prevention or recovery schools, and the rural Delta region of the state has a large concentration of D and F rated schools (e27). Both types of schools receive larger numbers of priority points on subgrantee applications: 10 and 8 points, respectively (e39).
- In addition to having these specific competitive priorities, the applicant further ensures that it will support schools serving at-risk students by including a grant performance metric that requires 100% of subgrantees that address at least one competitive priority (e23), which the above represent all by one (e38-40).
- Applicants for subgrants under this applicant need to clearly articulate their anticipated enrollment for student eligible for free lunch and students with disabilities (e196), which will help allow the applicant to provide subgrant to schools providing access to these student groups.
- In addition to the aspects of the subgrant application mentioned above, the state's charter law doesn't allow LEAs to veto authorized schools in D and F rated districts (e17), effectively guaranteeing that subgrantees will be opening schools in districts with large concentrations of at-risk students.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 3

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