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

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)
Reader #1:   **********

		Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions			
Selection Criteria			
Significance			
1. Significance		15	13
Strategy to Scale			
1. Strategy to Scale		40	39
Quality of Project Design			
1. Project Design		15	12
Quality of the Project Evaluation			
1. Project Evaluation		30	0
	Sub Total	100	64
Priority Questions			
Competitive Preference Priority			
Competitive Preference Priority 1			
1. Promoting Equity		5	2
	Sub Total	5	2
	Total	105	66

Technical Review Form

Reader #1: **********

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Significance

1. **The Secretary considers the significance of the proposed project. In determining the significance of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 13

Sub

1. **The extent to which the proposed project involves the development or demonstration of promising new strategies that build on, or are alternatives to, existing strategies.**

   Strengths:

   The applicants have referred to previous adolescent literacy interventions and identified their limitations. Specifically, they propose to address three of these limitations by implementing The Third Quest (TTQ) intervention. These shortcomings include a lack of explicit focus on fundamental literacy instruction, insufficient emphasis on building background knowledge, and an absence of motivational supports (e21-24). Given that these approaches are grounded in evidence-based research, validated by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), there is compelling evidence that the proposed project will employ strategies that improve upon existing ones. Furthermore, the applicants plan to combine three practices into one intervention, indicating the development of a promising new strategy.

   Weaknesses:

   The applicants have fallen short in providing adequate evidence about the potential differential effects of the intervention on targeted populations, notably English Language Learners (ELLs). This oversight represents a weakness in this section, as without this information, it becomes challenging to discern how the project will evolve from existing strategies to adequately address the specific needs of these students.

   Reader's Score: 13

Selection Criteria - Strategy to Scale

1. **The Secretary considers the strategy to scale the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 39

Sub

Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which the applicant identifies a specific strategy or strategies that address a particular barrier or barriers that prevented the applicant, in the past, from reaching the level of scale that is proposed in the application.**

   Strengths:

   The applicants have outlined a strategy to overcome three key challenges identified from prior iterations of this intervention (e137). Firstly, they plan to address the often-encountered constraint of districts' limited capacity to implement such programs. This will be achieved by actively engaging district-level stakeholders in summer training sessions and the design of collaborative workshops (e26). Secondly, they propose to combat issues of low engagement, limited knowledge acquisition, and inadequate pre-implementation preparation. This will be done by incorporating adult learning principles into a three-day virtual summer training program. During this time, teachers and coordinators will receive training on the intervention, have the opportunity to practice it, and develop an implementation plan (e26-27). Lastly, the applicants aim to enhance scaffolding for teacher knowledge acquisition and expertise development by offering additional supports throughout the academic year. These supports include guidance materials, checklists, and workshops (e27). The strategies proposed by the applicants to tackle the identified barriers are detailed and well-explained, thus reinforcing their capacity to scale up this intervention.

   Weaknesses:

   None noted.

   Reader's Score: 10

2. **(2) 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.**

   Strengths:

   The roles and responsibilities of each partner are explicitly defined (e32, 139-142), and an organizational chart further clarifies the relationships and duties among partners (e145). The American Institutions of Research (AIR) will oversee the project, handling tasks such as school recruitment, evaluation, and dissemination. Ancora, on the other hand, will execute the intervention, supply all necessary materials, carry out activities in schools, and assist districts with any related implementation tasks (e29). District partners will contribute to recruitment efforts, data collection, and communication with other partners as needed. They will also arrange for teachers to have time off to complete intervention materials (e29). A management plan (e139-142) and a project timeline (e138) have been provided, positioning the applicants well to successfully fulfill the project's objectives on schedule and within budget. Partners will conduct regular meetings to monitor progress towards completion and make necessary adjustments, particularly during the pilot phase. The project's formative evaluation phase is exceptionally well designed, which should contribute significantly to its success.

   Weaknesses:

   This application does not include the time commitment that the TTQ trainers will dedicate to the project, which constitutes a weakness in this section.

   Reader's Score: 4

3. **(3) The applicant's capacity (e.g., in terms of qualified personnel, financial resources, or management capacity) to bring the proposed project to scale on a national or regional level (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)) working directly, or through partners, during the grant period.**

   Strengths:

   The leading applicant, AIR, provides a compelling narrative that bolsters their ability to successfully execute this project. With decades of experience leading large-scale projects (e31) and a team skilled in areas from

implementation to quality assurance and financial support, AIR appears fully capable of accomplishing their assigned responsibilities. The specific individuals entrusted with the project's management are named, and their qualifications are succinctly detailed in the narrative (e32, 166-167), with further evidence found in their resumes (e70-89). With expertise ranging from the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to professional development, and from the management of large-scale projects to quantitative and qualitative research, the key personnel are well-equipped for this project. Moreover, the project will gain insights from two advisors, whose qualifications are clearly outlined (e146). The application also includes letters of support from six school districts across ten states (e90-109), many of which confirm their financial, in-kind, and practical support, such as allowing teachers release time to implement the intervention. This affirms AIR's capacity to recruit a sufficient number of schools to conduct the study as planned. It also indicates a level of district buy-in, a critical factor for success in school-based interventions. The applicants plan to offer incentives to participating teachers or districts (e176), which could enhance recruitment, foster engagement, and improve retention, thereby bolstering their capacity to execute this project as intended.

Weaknesses:

None noted.

Reader's Score: 10

4. **(4) The mechanisms the applicant will use to broadly disseminate information on its project so as to support further development or replication.**

Strengths:

The applicants have outlined a comprehensive dissemination plan that leverages various communication channels to reach a wide audience, including researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and reading specialists (e143-144). Specifically, they will utilize both conventional outlets such as academic conferences (e33) and less conventional ones like social media to share the findings of their study. They unequivocally commit to disseminating broadly the materials they develop, such as infographics and videos. Importantly, the applicants specify that the dissemination materials will feature toolkits and how-to guides (e143). This ensures that the developed resources have strong potential to facilitate further development or replication of their strategies and findings.

Weaknesses:

None noted.

Reader's Score: 10

5. **(5) The likely utility of the products (such as information, materials processes, or techniques) that will result from the proposed project, including the potential for their being used effectively in a variety of other settings.**

Strengths:

The potential value of the project's resulting products for certain audiences is considerable. For instance, conference presentations and journal articles will likely be of great benefit to researchers. Furthermore, for those interested in improving support for adolescent learners in enhancing their reading skills, the informal materials could serve as an excellent introduction to this intervention.

Weaknesses:

None noted.

Reader's Score: 5

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 the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 12

    Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which there is a conceptual framework underlying the proposed research or demonstration activities and the quality of that framework.**

    Strengths:

The applicants provide substantial evidence backing the intervention's design (e18, 19, 35, 193), incorporating strategies to enhance adolescent literacy skills and the application of positive behavioral and socio-emotional supports (e18, 134-136). Additionally, TTQ has been assessed in prior iterations and found to meet WWC standards (e19). The integration of these core components into the proposed intervention bolsters the theory of action. A logic model included in the appendix effectively illustrates the connections between the various project components and the expected outcomes (e114). This model aligns well with the conceptual framework and is clearly designed, further supporting the effectiveness and potential success of the project.

    Weaknesses:

None noted.

    Reader's Score: 5

2. **(2) The extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are clearly specified and measurable.**

    Strengths:

The goals, objectives, and outcomes of this intervention are distinctly articulated in a table format (e36-38), covering every phase of the project along with the strategies to achieve each objective. The objectives are clearly stated and measurable. For instance, the plan targets at least 80% of students to complete surveys and for 75% of instructors to participate in interviews, objectives that strike a balance between being ambitious and realistic (e36). This section, which ranges from recruitment to training, and from setting formative evaluation goals to implementing collected feedback prior to the scaling phase, stands as a strength in this application. The well-defined and measurable goals ensure that progress can be effectively tracked and evaluated, enhancing the project's potential for success.

    Weaknesses:

None noted.

    Reader's Score: 5

3. **(3) The extent to which the design of the proposed project is appropriate to, and will successfully address, the needs of the target population or other identified needs.**

    Strengths:

The project design clearly takes into careful consideration the unique needs of struggling adolescent readers. Through a concise literature review and comprehensive narrative, the applicants present a compelling argument for how TTQ will successfully cater to their target group by offering evidence-based literacy instruction, support for

background content knowledge, and positive behavior elements. Notably, the applicants highlight the significant correlation between background characteristics such as ELL status, ethnicity, and urbanicity, and lower levels of literacy skills (e38). Given this strong correlation, the project could impact a specific group of high-needs students. Lastly, to ensure accessibility, the recruitment materials will be translated and transliterated as needed (e147). This underscores the project's commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that it reaches and benefits a diverse set of students.

Weaknesses:

The application provides a general outline of literacy skills support, and it does not specifically address the unique needs of ELLs. It is commonly understood that ELLs may require differentiated approaches as they concurrently develop competence in English and improve literacy skills. This nuanced aspect is not touched upon or explained in the application, which could limit the effectiveness of the proposed intervention for this particular group. Furthermore, the applicants do not clarify whether dissemination materials, particularly those intended for parents, will also be translated as needed. This could potentially create barriers in effective communication and engagement with non-English speaking parents, limiting their ability to support their children's involvement in the intervention.

Reader's Score: 2

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Project Evaluation

1. **The Secretary considers the quality of the evaluation to be conducted of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the evaluation, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 0

1. **(1) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will, if well implemented, produce evidence about the project's effectiveness that would meet the What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations as described in the What Works Clearinghouse Handbook (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)).**

   Strengths:

   n/a

   Weaknesses:

   n/a

   Reader's Score: 0

2. **(2) The extent to which the evaluation will provide guidance about effective strategies suitable for replication or testing in other settings.**

   Strengths:

   n/a

   Weaknesses:

   n/a

Sub

    Reader's Score: **0**

3. **(3) The extent to which the evaluation plan clearly articulates the key project components, mediators, and outcomes, as well as a measurable threshold for acceptable implementation.**

    Strengths:

    Weaknesses:

    Reader's Score:

4. **(4) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment of progress toward achieving intended outcomes.**

    Strengths:

    Weaknesses:

    Reader's Score:

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Competitive Preference Priority 1

1. **Competitive Preference Priority 1:**

   Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources and Opportunities: Implementers and Partners (up to 5 points)

   Under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate how the project will be implemented by or in partnership with one or more of the following entities:

   (a) **Community colleges (as defined in the NIA)**
   (b) **Historically Black colleges and universities (as defined in the NIA)**
   (c) **Tribal Colleges and Universities (as defined in the NIA)**
   (d) **Minority-serving institutions (as defined in the NIA)**

Strengths:

The applicants propose to collaborate with a community college partner by establishing a scholar's group. This group will grant students in pre-social work programs direct exposure to the implementation of this intervention. Furthermore, these students will have the opportunity to contribute feedback that will be considered during the scaling up phase of the project (e30).

Weaknesses:

The applicants' engagement strategy with the community college partner is vaguely detailed. There is an absence of information elucidating the nature of this partnership. For instance, only a minimal portion of the budget is allocated to this partnership (e175), indicating limited involvement. This ambiguity regarding the partnership compromises its quality and stands out as a significant weak point in this section.

Reader's Score: 2

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/21/2023 05:47 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)
Reader #2:   **********

		Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions			
Selection Criteria			
Significance			
1. Significance		15	0
Strategy to Scale			
1. Strategy to Scale		40	0
Quality of Project Design			
1. Project Design		15	0
Quality of the Project Evaluation			
1. Project Evaluation		30	22
	Sub Total	100	22
Priority Questions			
Competitive Preference Priority			
Competitive Preference Priority 1			
1. Promoting Equity		5	0
	Sub Total	5	0
	Total	105	22

Panel #2 - EIR Mid-phase - 2: 84.411B

Reader #2:   **********

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Significance

1. **The Secretary considers the significance of the proposed project. In determining the significance of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: **0**

   Sub

    1. **The extent to which the proposed project involves the development or demonstration of promising new strategies that build on, or are alternatives to, existing strategies.**

     Strengths:

     N/A

     Weaknesses:

     N/A

     Reader's Score: **0**

Selection Criteria - Strategy to Scale

1. **The Secretary considers the strategy to scale the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: **0**

   Sub

    1. **(1) The extent to which the applicant identifies a specific strategy or strategies that address a particular barrier or barriers that prevented the applicant, in the past, from reaching the level of scale that is proposed in the application.**

     Strengths:

     N/A

     Weaknesses:

     N/A

Reader's Score: 0

2. **(2) 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.**

   Strengths:

   N/A

   Weaknesses:

   N/A

   Reader's Score: 0

3. **(3) The applicant's capacity (e.g., in terms of qualified personnel, financial resources, or management capacity) to bring the proposed project to scale on a national or regional level (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)) working directly, or through partners, during the grant period.**

   Strengths:

   N/A

   Weaknesses:

   N/A

   Reader's Score: 0

4. **(4) The mechanisms the applicant will use to broadly disseminate information on its project so as to support further development or replication.**

   Strengths:

   N/A

   Weaknesses:

   N/A

   Reader's Score: 0

5. **(5) The likely utility of the products (such as information, materials processes, or techniques) that will result from the proposed project, including the potential for their being used effectively in a variety of other settings.**

   Strengths:

   N/A

   Weaknesses:

   N/A

   Reader's Score: 0

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 the following factors:**

Reader's Score: **0**

    Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which there is a conceptual framework underlying the proposed research or demonstration activities and the quality of that framework.**

    Strengths:

    N/A

    Weaknesses:

    N/A

    Reader's Score: **0**

2. **(2) The extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are clearly specified and measurable.**

    Strengths:

    N/A

    Weaknesses:

    N/A

    Reader's Score: **0**

3. **(3) The extent to which the design of the proposed project is appropriate to, and will successfully address, the needs of the target population or other identified needs.**

    Strengths:

    N/A

    Weaknesses:

    N/A

    Reader's Score: **0**

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Project Evaluation

1. **The Secretary considers the quality of the evaluation to be conducted of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the evaluation, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will, if well implemented, produce evidence about the project's effectiveness that would meet the What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations as described in the What Works Clearinghouse Handbook (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)).**

   Strengths:

   Overall, the applicant demonstrates a good understanding of the WWC standards, anticipates likely challenges in implementing the proposed study, and proposes strategies to address them (e.g., getting consent for student participation).

   To measure the impact of The Third Quest (TTQ) on student reading skills, the applicant proposes to use Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) for word reading and reading fluency, with test-retest reliability of 0.74-0.91 for subscales and Gates-MacGinite Reading Teste (GMRT) for reading comprehension and vocabulary, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.91-0.93 for subscales (e42, e150). To measure the impact on student motivation, the applicant proposes to use a Learning with Others (LWO), with Cronbach alpha of 0.75-0.88 for subscales. LWO is a validated survey used in a prior study. (e.42, e150) These outcomes student measures meet the WWC standards' face validity and reliability requirements. The applicant proposes to field these instruments (DIBELS, GMART, and LOW) at the beginning of the school year (before the implementation) and at the end of the school year (immediately following the implementation) during class in both the intervention and program schools (e42).

   The applicant proposes to conduct a blocked cluster RCT with two cohorts of schools (2025-26 and 2026-27 cohorts), with the school as the unit of assignment. For each cohort, schools will be randomly assigned either to one year of the intervention or to the control condition, blocked by the district/consortium. The control group schools will be offered the intervention for the year following the implementation. The study will include grade 6-7 students enrolled in Tier 2 settings, with the intervention group receiving TTQ as their Tier 2 instruction while the control group receiving business-as-usual instruction. (e39-41).

   The evaluation team proposes to take steps toward ensuring that the treatment and control group samples are equivalent. To prevent students from self-selecting into the treatment schools, the applicant proposes to request that the treatment schools refrain from publicizing the use of TTQ before the implementation (e40). The evaluation will also propose to require the treatment and control schools within the same district or consortium to have the same placement criteria for Tier 2 reading instruction (e40-41).

   The applicant expects that the likelihood of attrition at the school level is low since the implementation lasts only one year (e41), which seems a reasonable assumption.

   Students and families must consent to participate in the key data collection activities (e.g., DIBELS, GMART, LOW, and student surveys). To minimize attrition (non-participation in the data collection) among students, the applicant plans to use passive consent whenever possible and proposes providing information to parents and facilitating conversations with parents when consent is not returned. (e41).

   The applicant recruits schools from 11 school groups (6 individual districts and five consortiums of districts/schools) across ten states (e28, e131-e133). The applicant proposes the impact sample to include grade 6-7 students in Tier 2 intervention settings in 72 schools. The first impact study cohort will include 36 schools from four school groups (two districts and two consortiums) in four states (CA/OK/IL/ OR), and the second cohort will include 36 schools from three school groups (three consortiums) in two states (MI/PA) (e44). Assuming the per-school average of 8 students in Tier 2 reading intervention settings, the applicant expects an analytic sample of 576 students. Based on their power analysis with reasonable parameter assumptions, the applicant reports MDES of 0.20 under a somewhat conservative scenario (72 schools and 8 students per school) and 0.17 (or 0.19) under more optimistic scenarios of 72 schools with 16 students per school (or 80 schools with 8 students per school) (e151). The applicant reports that the effect size of 0.17 is similar to the average effect of ELA achievement cited by WWC for

reading intervention in grades 4-9 (e.40). The target sample size can be considered reasonable.

The applicant proposes to estimate the impact with a regression model, accounting for the clustering effects at the school level. The applicant proposes to control for the student outcome at the baseline, student characteristics, and Tier2 service characteristics (e152).

Weaknesses:

It is unclear who is conducting the fielding of DIBELS, GMRT, and LWO. The proposal suggests that "trained data collectors" will administer student tests (e10, e42, e165, e168, e176-177), but it also clearly states that "DIBELS and GMRT will be administered by Tier 2 instructors" (e42). It is unclear how the evaluation team will ensure consistency in data collection between the intervention and control groups if these tests are to be administered by instructors.

The proposal does not sufficiently discuss concern for attrition (and missing data) at the student level (or explain why they are not concerned about it). The student-level attrition could pose a concern for the proposed evaluation because the student sample size is already relatively small (the applicant assumes just 8 students per school, e40), and the study targets high-needs students enrolled in Tier 2 reading classrooms who are generally at a higher risk of attrition. The study also relies on direct student data collection with consent requirements, which can mean a higher rate of missing data (compared to admin records) even with their proposed strategies for the consent process. Furthermore, because the intervention targets to improve student motivation, it can potentially reduce attrition, raising concern for the risk of bias due to differential attrition between control and program groups.

The applicant does not adequately explain the rationale for conducting an impact analysis preliminarily with the first cohort data (e152). Since the power analysis (e151) suggests that half the sample is unlikely to have enough power (e151), it is unclear what the merit of running a model prematurely. (The applicant suggests using the preliminary results to inform Ancora's continuous program improvement; however, underpowered analyses results could lead to misleading understanding.) Early look into the data could lead the evaluation team to manipulate or adjust analytic plans to improve the estimation for pooled methods, which could bring transparency and accountability of researchers into question. The applicant does not explain how they might address such a concern or why this is not a concern.

The applicant proposes to include the interaction between the treatment and cohort effects, noting that it will capture the improvement in the intervention between the first and second year of the impact (e152). The applicant does not fully explain the rationale for including such an interaction term for the confirmatory analysis of the impact and what they consider the measure of the impact under such a model specification.

Reader's Score: **10**

2. **(2) The extent to which the evaluation will provide guidance about effective strategies suitable for replication or testing in other settings.**

Strengths:

The applicant proposes systematically collecting a range of implementation data from each cohort (1 pilot and 2 impact study cohorts) to assess the quality and fidelity. These include instructors' lesson logs, video recordings of instruction, instructor surveys, interviews with pilot instructors, instructor surveys, and student surveys. The applicant plans to use these data in a mixed-method implementation study to assess the fidelity and the quality of the implementation, identify aspects of TTQ with implementation challenges, and provide feedback on improving the program components. (e43, e44)

The applicant proposes to evaluate the intervention in multiple states, with schools representing a range of geographic (urban vs. rural) and student demographics (e44). The findings from the evaluation could provide insights into the scalability of TTQ in a variety of settings.

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not propose investigating the potential for heterogenous impacts by school and student profiles. Such an analysis could provide additional information on where and among whom TTQs are more or less effective.

An independent perspective is essential in developing effective strategies for replication or testing in other settings. The applicant (AIR) leads both the implementation (with the support of Ancora) and the evaluation (e29). The applicant proposes to train staff to report concerns about dependence but does not sufficiently explain who will be credibly held accountable for ensuring independence.

The proposal states that AIR is the project's lead organization, and Ancora will "support" the implementation of TTQ. While the proposal says that AIR's evaluation team will not play a role in the implementation (e31), it does not assure that those with a vested interest in successful implementation and positive outcomes will not influence the evaluation team's analytic activities.

Reader's Score: 4

3. **(3) The extent to which the evaluation plan clearly articulates the key project components, mediators, and outcomes, as well as a measurable threshold for acceptable implementation.**

Strengths:

The applicant clearly articulates three key project components: evidence-based practice to promote secondary literacy skills (decoding, multi-syllable words, fluency, vocabulary and word study, reading comprehension); evidence-based practice to promote student reading motivation; evidence-based practice to build content knowledge needed for secondary coursework (e45, e114).

The applicant identifies reading motivation as an intermediate outcome and a factor that mediates TTQ's impact on student reading skills (e25).

The applicant specifies measurable implementation outcomes they plan to track (e36-e38).

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not specify thresholds for acceptable implementation in the proposal or at least discuss selecting implementation metrics for which acceptable levels of fidelity are to be established.

According to the proposed conceptual framework (e35) and the corresponding logic model (e114), TTQ implementation will improve students' reading motivation, which in turn will lead to an improvement in student reading performance. The theory of change also expects increased student reading performance to improve student motivation (e34 and e114), implying that reading motivation mediates the impact on reading performance while reading performance mediates the effects on reading motivation. While this bi-directional relationship is highlighted in the theory of change, the proposal does not sufficiently discuss how the applicant plans to address such bi-directional effects in the proposed mediator analyses (e46).

Reader's Score: 3

4. **(4) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment of progress toward achieving intended outcomes.**

Strengths:

The applicant proposes to include the feedback process involving the students enrolled in the pre-social work program at higher education institutions (e30).

The applicant proposes to provide formative feedback to Ancora (the developer of TTQ) throughout the project. The evaluation team proposes to provide Ancora with yearly implementation and study reporting as well as ongoing monitoring of the implementation progress (e43, e47-49). The applicant plans to provide feedback in support of TTQ implementation as well as feedback for program design improvement. The evaluation team plans to examine lesson logs monthly to identify instructors at risk of not completing the curriculum and inform Ancora so that it can provide support for those instructors. The continuous feedback is also expected to allow Ancora to make adjustments while the implementation is in progress. The evaluation team also plans to provide Ancora with instructors' feedback on activities they find challenging. The applicant expects Ancora to modify the training or curriculum based on the analyses of the feedback from pilot instructors before the impact study implementation. (e47-e49)

Weaknesses:

No weakness is noted.

Reader's Score: 5

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Competitive Preference Priority 1

1. **Competitive Preference Priority 1:**

Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources and Opportunities: Implementers and Partners (up to 5 points)

Under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate how the project will be implemented by or in partnership with one or more of the following entities:

   (a) **Community colleges (as defined in the NIA)**
   (b) **Historically Black colleges and universities (as defined in the NIA)**
   (c) **Tribal Colleges and Universities (as defined in the NIA)**
   (d) **Minority-serving institutions (as defined in the NIA)**

Strengths:

N/A

Weaknesses:

N/A

Reader's Score: 0

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/21/2023 05:47 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)
Reader #4:   **********

		Points Possible	**Points Scored**
Questions			
Selection Criteria			
Significance			
1. Significance		15	10
Strategy to Scale			
1. Strategy to Scale		40	31
Quality of Project Design			
1. Project Design		15	12
Quality of the Project Evaluation			
1. Project Evaluation		30	0
	Sub Total	100	53
Priority Questions			
Competitive Preference Priority			
Competitive Preference Priority 1			
1. Promoting Equity		5	2
	Sub Total	5	2
	Total	105	55

Technical Review Form

Reader #4: **********

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Significance

1. **The Secretary considers the significance of the proposed project. In determining the significance of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 10

> **Sub**

> 1. **The extent to which the proposed project involves the development or demonstration of promising new strategies that build on, or are alternatives to, existing strategies.**

> **Strengths:**

> The applicant explained the unmet demand for scaling a comprehensive and well-sequenced reading intervention targeting adolescent reading development and reading motivation of diverse 5-8th grade students by (a) citing national data and post-Covid reading achievement indicating a steep decline in reading comprehension outcomes, especially of high need students, and a growing number of students reading below grade level in middle schools and (b) reviewing research evidence that uncovered long-term adverse effect of low literacy outcomes in middle school on students achievement across content areas (p. e13).

> The applicant addressed elements of Absolute Priority 1 and Absolute Priority 4 by proposing to implement, scale, and evaluate the effects of a set of three program components that What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guides described as fundamental to adolescent literacy interventions, including (a) explicit instruction in decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, (b) sustained focus on building background knowledge using content-rich and high-interest texts, and (c) positive behavioral supports, social and emotional supports, and high-interest texts to promote reading motivation. (p. e15, e134-e136).

> **Weaknesses:**

> Insufficient information is included regarding previous evidence base for the proposed literacy intervention, The Third Quest (TTQ), including (a) findings of previous evaluation studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of the TTQ program in promoting reading achievement and reading motivation of diverse groups of middle school striving readers, including special education student, black students, multilingual students, English Learners, (b) if there was variation in the level of engagement in the reading intervention activities of diverse groups of underserved students, (c) if participating teachers implementing TTQ in previous iterations found the program useful and aligned to their goals of motivating and engaging diverse groups of underserved students, (d) what other PL supports teachers identified that they needed to make the intervention accessible to all students via evidence-based instructional and language supports, and (e) if participating students found the content and techniques useful, inclusive, and cohesive (pp. e134-e136).

> **Reader's Score:** 10

Selection Criteria - Strategy to Scale

1. **The Secretary considers the strategy to scale the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 31

Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which the applicant identifies a specific strategy or strategies that address a particular barrier or barriers that prevented the applicant, in the past, from reaching the level of scale that is proposed in the application.**

   Strengths:

   The applicant identified a set of three barriers that prevented the applicant in the past from reaching the level of scale that is proposed in the application, including (a) limited capacity within districts or limited availability of local leaders to support implementation of Tier 2 programs, (b) insufficient educator knowledge acquisition, buy-in, and planning prior to the program implementation, and [c] insufficient professional support for educators to implement TTQ with fidelity (p. e25). The applicant's proposed strategy to provide professional learning to teachers and district level coordinators may contribute to familiarizing teachers with TTQ. Similarly, the applicant's proposed strategy to provide ongoing support for the implementation of the proposed intervention (via guidance materials, implementation checklists, and collaborative workshops) may support implementation of TTQ with fidelity. (pp. e26-e28, e137).

   Weaknesses:

   The applicant's proposed strategy to offer a relatively short summer training may be insufficient in addressing the barrier of time for teacher buy-in. teacher planning for implementation, and teacher practice of using the materials for a comprehensive reading intervention that includes 75 lessons and additional social emotional supports (pp. e26-e28, e138-e142).

   Reader's Score: 7

2. **(2) 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.**

   Strengths:

   The management plan specifies clearly defined responsibilities for project partners, timelines, milestones, and a budget narrative to support costs requested through grant activities for accomplishing project tasks on time and within budget to achieve the main objectives of the proposed project and to recruit schools, implement, scale, evaluate, and disseminate the proposed project's impact on reading motivation, and reading achievement via a randomized trial experiment in participating schools (pp. e138-e142).

   Weaknesses:

   The management plan does not include details regarding the number and time commitment of TTQ trainers, including donated TTQ staff time for each year of implementation for the duration of the project even though TTQ trainers play a key role to support teachers with implementation fidelity (p. e179).

   Reader's Score: 3

3. **(3) The applicant's capacity (e.g., in terms of qualified personnel, financial resources, or management capacity) to bring the proposed project to scale on a national or regional**

level (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)) working directly, or through partners, during the grant period.

Strengths:

The attached resumes and support letters (including letters of support from school districts and project partners) indicate that, the applicant has the capacity to (a) manage multi-site, externally-funded grants, (b) implement a large-scale literacy intervention, (c) recruit school districts, (d) disseminate products broadly, and (e) collect and analyze data to establish efficacy of TTQ via the proposed evaluation study (pp. e69-e89)

Weaknesses:

As the developer of the TTQ literacy intervention program, Ancora is responsible for supporting the implementation of TTQ across all participating schools, yet insufficient information is included regarding the organizational capacity and previous experiences of TTQ trainers to implement large-scale grant projects such as the one proposed and to support large-scale implementation in participating schools during the grant period (pp. e69-e89).

Reader's Score: 7

4. **(4) The mechanisms the applicant will use to broadly disseminate information on its project so as to support further development or replication.**

Strengths:

The proposed mechanisms the applicant will use to broadly disseminate information in its project include (a) briefs, infographics, web events, and videos with information on the project, its results, and lessons learned that will be made available on the TTQ and Ancora websites, (b) blogs, videos, social media posts, brief practitioner-friendly reports and examples in practice, and infographics to communicate evaluation findings to a broad audience including policy makers, researchers, and practitioners that will be made available through national and regional comprehensive centers, journals, and conferences (pp. e33-e34, e.143-e144).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses found

Reader's Score: 10

5. **(5) The likely utility of the products (such as information, materials processes, or techniques) that will result from the proposed project, including the potential for their being used effectively in a variety of other settings.**

Strengths:

The applicant responded to the elements of the scoring criteria via a plan to improve the potential of the products (such as information, materials, processes) that will result from the proposed project being used effectively in a variety of other settings via a plan to (a) share empirical findings in accessible ways to school personnel through the use of social media platforms, infographic development, (b) share findings via the NCII Instructional Tools Chart that is a widely used resource for schools and districts to find program information, and (c) share TTQ playbook and manual that includes all activity protocols, materials, program videos and guides via Ancora Publishing website (pp. e143-e144).

Weaknesses:

The applicant did not include a plan to translate the materials that will result from the proposed project to make them accessible in languages other than English to improve the likely utility of the products in bilingual programs (pp. e143-e144).

Sub

Reader's Score: 4

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 the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 12

Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which there is a conceptual framework underlying the proposed research or demonstration activities and the quality of that framework.**

   Strengths:

   The applicant responded to the elements of the criteria by including a logic model summarizing the conceptual framework underlying the proposed project to explain how the core components (including a comprehensive focus on key literacy skills, evidence-based strategies for building students' background knowledge relevant to grade-level content areas, and additional social emotional support) affect positively the reading motivation and reading achievement of the striving readers. (p. e114).

   Weaknesses:

   Insufficient discussion is included regarding the extent to which theory and research on equitable literacy instruction of multilingual students and English Learners in school settings has informed the conceptual framework of the proposed project and the extent to which the proposed intervention includes language supports to teach English literacy skills to multilingual students and English Learners (p. e25-e29, e35).

   Reader's Score: 4

2. **(2) The extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are clearly specified and measurable.**

   Strengths:

   The applicant responded to the elements of the criteria by specifying clearly measurable goals and outcomes to reach the main objectives of the proposed literacy intervention, specifically to (a) implement and refine TTQ scaling supports through a yearlong field test, (b) implement TTQ at scale with fidelity and determine its impacts, and (c) broaden the project's impact through dissemination and further implementation (pp. e36-e38, e138-e142).

   Weaknesses:

   No weaknesses found

   Reader's Score: 5

3. **(3) The extent to which the design of the proposed project is appropriate to, and will successfully address, the needs of the target population or other identified needs.**

   Strengths:

   The applicant responded to the elements of the criteria by showing how (a) the proposed comprehensive literacy intervention helps to improve reading motivation, reading skills, (including decoding, fluency, word study and vocabulary, and comprehension) and builds background knowledge to promote student achievement in other content areas, (b) the proposed ongoing professional supports help teachers, schools, and school districts

implement the reading intervention with fidelity, and (c) the proposed social emotional supports improve students' reading motivation by leveraging social interaction through teamwork, providing and encouraging autonomy, building self-efficacy, and having students set mastery goals (p. e38).

Weaknesses:

The applicant did not provide sufficient information to determine the extent to which the design of the proposed literacy intervention is appropriate to, and will successfully address the strengths and needs of multilingual learners and English Learners via the (a) integration of evidence-based language supports in the 75 TTQ lessons to promote reading achievement of multilingual students and English Learners with varied levels of native language and English skills and (b) integration in the professional learning of evidence-based instructional and language supports to help teachers make the literacy intervention accessible to all students, including multilingual students and English Learners (p. e38).

Reader's Score: 3

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Project Evaluation

1. **The Secretary considers the quality of the evaluation to be conducted of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the evaluation, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 0

Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will, if well implemented, produce evidence about the project's effectiveness that would meet the What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations as described in the What Works Clearinghouse Handbook (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)).**

   Strengths:

   Weaknesses:

   Reader's Score:

2. **(2) The extent to which the evaluation will provide guidance about effective strategies suitable for replication or testing in other settings.**

   Strengths:

   Weaknesses:

   Reader's Score:

3. **(3) The extent to which the evaluation plan clearly articulates the key project**

Sub

components, mediators, and outcomes, as well as a measurable threshold for acceptable implementation.

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Reader's Score:

4. **(4) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment of progress toward achieving intended outcomes.**

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Reader's Score:

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Competitive Preference Priority 1

1. **Competitive Preference Priority 1:**

Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources and Opportunities: Implementers and Partners (up to 5 points)

Under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate how the project will be implemented by or in partnership with one or more of the following entities:

- (a) **Community colleges (as defined in the NIA)**
- (b) **Historically Black colleges and universities (as defined in the NIA)**
- (c) **Tribal Colleges and Universities (as defined in the NIA)**
- (d) **Minority-serving institutions (as defined in the NIA)**

Strengths:

The applicant addressed elements of CPP1 by integrating underrepresented students from a community college program studying social work and related fields with an interest and expertise in the development of high-needs youth in the proposed intervention. Specifically, these students will serve as thought partners in developing relevant, engaging, and culturally responsive strategies to ensure that TTQ serves the social-emotional needs of the students who could benefit most from it, including to (a) assist integrating social emotional supports in TTQ, (b) work with the research team to develop interview questions regarding social-emotional learning for instructors, (c) observe recorded lessons and assess how social emotional components are incorporated into instruction, both in the lesson plans and in the delivery and (d) provide feedback to project partners (Ancora and AIR) to inform refinements to the instructional materials and future trainings to instructors about how to effectively deliver the social-emotional components of the intervention (p. e175).

Weaknesses:

The applicant did not demonstrate a strong partnership with the minority institution. Specifically, the budgetary allocation to the minority institution is quite limited, and hourly involvement of students from the minority institution is minimal in the proposed intervention (p. e175).

Reader's Score: **2**

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/21/2023 05:47 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)
Reader #5:   **********

		Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions			
Selection Criteria			
Significance			
1. Significance		15	0
Strategy to Scale			
1. Strategy to Scale		40	0
Quality of Project Design			
1. Project Design		15	0
Quality of the Project Evaluation			
1. Project Evaluation		30	21
	Sub Total	100	21
Priority Questions			
Competitive Preference Priority			
Competitive Preference Priority 1			
1. Promoting Equity		5	0
	Sub Total	5	0
	Total	105	21

Technical Review Form

Reader #5: **********

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Significance

1. **The Secretary considers the significance of the proposed project. In determining the significance of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: **0**

    Sub

    1. **The extent to which the proposed project involves the development or demonstration of promising new strategies that build on, or are alternatives to, existing strategies.**

      Strengths:

      Not required to score

      Weaknesses:

      Not required to score

    Reader's Score: **0**

Selection Criteria - Strategy to Scale

1. **The Secretary considers the strategy to scale the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: **0**

    Sub

    1. **(1) The extent to which the applicant identifies a specific strategy or strategies that address a particular barrier or barriers that prevented the applicant, in the past, from reaching the level of scale that is proposed in the application.**

      Strengths:

      Not required to score

      Weaknesses:

      Not required to score

Sub

Reader's Score: 0

2. **(2) 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.**

   Strengths:

   Not required to score

   Weaknesses:

   Not required to score

   Reader's Score: 0

3. **(3) The applicant's capacity (e.g., in terms of qualified personnel, financial resources, or management capacity) to bring the proposed project to scale on a national or regional level (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)) working directly, or through partners, during the grant period.**

   Strengths:

   Not required to score

   Weaknesses:

   Not required to score

   Reader's Score: 0

4. **(4) The mechanisms the applicant will use to broadly disseminate information on its project so as to support further development or replication.**

   Strengths:

   Not required to score

   Weaknesses:

   Not required to score

   Reader's Score: 0

5. **(5) The likely utility of the products (such as information, materials processes, or techniques) that will result from the proposed project, including the potential for their being used effectively in a variety of other settings.**

   Strengths:

   Not required to score

   Weaknesses:

   Not required to score

   Reader's Score: 0

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 the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 0

     Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which there is a conceptual framework underlying the proposed research or demonstration activities and the quality of that framework.**

    Strengths:

    Not required to score

    Weaknesses:

    Not required to score

    Reader's Score: 0

2. **(2) The extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are clearly specified and measurable.**

    Strengths:

    Not required to score

    Weaknesses:

    Not required to score

    Reader's Score: 0

3. **(3) The extent to which the design of the proposed project is appropriate to, and will successfully address, the needs of the target population or other identified needs.**

    Strengths:

    Not required to score

    Weaknesses:

    Not required to score

    Reader's Score: 0

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Project Evaluation

1. **The Secretary considers the quality of the evaluation to be conducted of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the evaluation, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 21

1. **(1) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will, if well implemented, produce evidence about the project's effectiveness that would meet the What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations as described in the What Works Clearinghouse Handbook (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)).**

    Strengths:

    AIR intends to conduct a blocked cluster Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) across two cohorts, comprising around 36 schools in total. Each cohort will consist of four blocks, each containing nine schools (e151). The study will exclude participants who join after the initial enrollment. The data collection will occur in the fall and spring of the study school year, addressing differential attrition at both school and student levels. Considering a potential attrition rate of 10% among randomized schools, the expected analytic sample size is projected to be 576 students from 72 schools (e39). This design is aimed at meeting the requirements for establishing strong evidence.

    Weaknesses:

    The study lacks a plan for preregistering the evaluation design, potentially leading to issues related to transparency and reporting bias.

    The chosen measures for assessment, including DIBELS and the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT), might offer limited data for the planned analyses. The GMRT, as a group-administered assessment, doesn't provide a robust individual student achievement measure. Incorporating a direct measure of individual student reading achievement would enhance the evaluation's quality.

    While schools will enroll small groups of sixth- or seventh-grade students in Tier 2 intervention settings, certain inconsistencies exist in the criteria for placing students into Tier 2. Though the proposal initially emphasizes uniform criteria (e29), it later indicates that districts or consortia might differ in this regard (e41). To maintain consistency, the proposal suggests removing students scoring above the 335 cut-off on the beginning-of-year DIBELS composite. However, a comprehensive plan to assess local Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and its implications on student inclusion/exclusion is missing.

    The project team will employ external staff (39 data collectors within 25 miles of school sites) and send results to the project team during Years 1–4. They allocated funds for each data collector to spend 16 hours training and to demonstrate reliability on the two assessments. It is unclear if the applicants plan to identify, train, and support data collectors will be adequate. Unclear who is administering each measure (and if they are blinded, consistency of test administration).

    Inadequate attention is given to the control group and the potential variations within the counterfactual, which could contribute to fluctuations in treatment effects.

    The logic model lacks clarity in explaining and aligning with the Confirmatory impact, specifically the inclusion of an interaction term.

    Reader's Score: 10

2. **(2) The extent to which the evaluation will provide guidance about effective strategies suitable for replication or testing in other settings.**

    Strengths:

    The blocked cluster design will enable the research team to assess variation in effects across blocks. The project plan and budget include a qualitative lead to uncover themes regarding administrative practices, youth engagement, program quality, and perceptions of outcomes aimed at continuous program improvement.

Sub

Weaknesses:

The proposed Cost Analysis focuses on implementation in treatment group (e153), but does not provide a plan for assessing ingredient costs in the control group, which is required for estimating cost-effectiveness.

Reader's Score: 3

3. **(3) The extent to which the evaluation plan clearly articulates the key project components, mediators, and outcomes, as well as a measurable threshold for acceptable implementation.**

Strengths:

The proposal will examine interaction of cohort effects with impact estimates. AIR will perform a mediator analysis to assess whether the effect of the program on student literacy skills is mediated by changes in student reading motivation, categorized into three groups based on initial and final motivation levels, and the results will inform adjustments to enhance the focus on increasing student motivation in future program cohorts (e46).

Weaknesses:

The implementation evaluation plan lacks sufficient detail regarding measurable thresholds for acceptable implementation. Although treatment instructors are expected to deliver a minimum of 67 out of 75 TTQ lessons throughout the year (e37), a more explicit definition of thresholds or a plan to establish them would enhance the proposal's clarity and accountability.
The independence of the evaluation team is unclear, as the implementation lead is responsible for the fidelity tool (e32). Ensuring an unbiased evaluation would be strengthened by delineating clear roles and responsibilities within the evaluation team.

The evaluation plan does not outline research questions aimed at exploring the mediators within the theory of change or potential moderator effects associated with variations in school or student-level attributes. Incorporating such research questions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the program's effects are influenced by underlying mechanisms and contextual factors.

The proposal lacks a robust plan around the theory of change. Explicitly detailing the program's theory of change, including key assumptions, pathways, and expected outcomes, would enhance the proposal's theoretical foundation and overall coherence.

Reader's Score: 3

4. **(4) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment of progress toward achieving intended outcomes.**

Strengths:

AIR proposes a range of products that will provide "independent feedback to Ancora throughout the grant period" (e44) and will translate the evaluation findings through blogs, videos, social media posts, brief practitioner-friendly reports and examples in practice, and infographics (e34, e143). Further, AIR will provide data to Ancora so that the implementation team can provide support (e47). AIR will translate the evaluation findings into accessible highlights through products such as blogs, videos, social media posts, brief practitioner-friendly reports and examples in practice, and infographics.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted

Sub

Reader's Score: 5

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Competitive Preference Priority 1

1. Competitive Preference Priority 1:

Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources and Opportunities: Implementers and Partners (up to 5 points)

Under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate how the project will be implemented by or in partnership with one or more of the following entities:

(a) Community colleges (as defined in the NIA)
(b) Historically Black colleges and universities (as defined in the NIA)
(c) Tribal Colleges and Universities (as defined in the NIA)
(d) Minority-serving institutions (as defined in the NIA)

Strengths:

Not required to score

Weaknesses:

Not required to score

Reader's Score: 0

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 08/21/2023 05:47 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)
Reader #6:   **********

		Points Possible	**Points Scored**
Questions			
Selection Criteria			
Significance			
1. Significance		15	13
Strategy to Scale			
1. Strategy to Scale		40	39
Quality of Project Design			
1. Project Design		15	13
Quality of the Project Evaluation			
1. Project Evaluation		30	0
	Sub Total	100	65
Priority Questions			
Competitive Preference Priority			
Competitive Preference Priority 1			
1. Promoting Equity		5	2
	Sub Total	5	2
	Total	105	67

Panel #2 - EIR Mid-phase - 2: 84.411B

Reader #6: **********

Applicant: American Institutes for Research (S411B230022)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Significance

1. **The Secretary considers the significance of the proposed project. In determining the significance of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 13

> **Sub**

> 1. **The extent to which the proposed project involves the development or demonstration of promising new strategies that build on, or are alternatives to, existing strategies.**

> **Strengths:**

> The proposed project involves the development and demonstration of promising new strategies that build on existing strategies. The applicant effectively demonstrates that current reading interventions for students in grades 5-8 fall short in increasing reading competencies as they focus less time on the fundamental skills students need to accurately decode multi-syllabic words and fluently read more complex secondary text; interventions for adolescents typically do not focus enough time on building background knowledge needed for secondary content learning; few adolescent literacy interventions systematically infuse motivational supports (p. e-22). In addition, the applicant effectively demonstrates that educators need evidence-based adolescent reading interventions (p. e-21). The applicant innovatively proposes to implement The Third Quest (TTQ) in new and diverse settings, using evidence-based strategies such as motivational supports to scale, and evaluating its effectiveness and learning lessons for future implementation (p. e-18). The proposed project will combine targeted interventions in reading braided with social and emotional supports that will contribute to the advancement of effective reading instruction for students in grades 5-8 (p. e-18).

> **Weaknesses:**

> The applicant does not describe the results of the previous TTQ implementation which would aid in determining if the intervention is considered a promising new strategy.

> **Reader's Score:** 13

Selection Criteria - Strategy to Scale

1. **The Secretary considers the strategy to scale the proposed project. In determining the quality of the design of the proposed project, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 39

1. **(1) The extent to which the applicant identifies a specific strategy or strategies that address a particular barrier or barriers that prevented the applicant, in the past, from reaching the level of scale that is proposed in the application.**

   Strengths:

   The applicant comprehensively identifies three barriers that prevented the applicant from reaching the level of scale in the past. These barriers include a limited capacity within districts or limited availability of local leaders to support implementation of Tier 2 programs; insufficient educator knowledge acquisition, buy-in, and planning prior to the program implementation; and insufficient scaffolding for educators to implement TTQ successfully (p. e- 25-26). To address these barriers, the applicant proposes proven strategies, which include building capacity of district-level coordinators; develop instructor's expertise and engage with instructors as experts; provide follow-up implementation supports through guidance materials, implementation checklists, and collaborative workshops (p. e-26). The applicant clearly describes each of the proposed strategies which supports the scaling of the proposed project. For example, to develop instructor's expertise, training will be provided during convenient times for teachers and will appropriately use group discussion, lectures, application of new knowledge, videos, and modeling. Training will be provided during the summer and trained instructors will fittingly become supports for their peers (p. e-26). The applicant provides an organized rubric that clearly depicts the identified barriers, proposed solutions, and effective strategies that will greatly contribute to the proposed project reaching scale and sustaining the interventions (p. e-137).

   Weaknesses:

   No weaknesses are noted.

   Reader's Score: 10

2. **(2) 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.**

   Strengths:

   The applicant proposes a mostly adequate management plan that is adequate to achieve the objectives on time and within budget. Innovatively, the applicant explicitly demonstrates that the management plan is designed to maintain distance between the implementation and research which is crucial in the success of the proposed project. The applicant clearly lists each project partner's major responsibilities which will contribute to achieving the objectives on time and within budget (p. e-30-31). For example, the applicant's responsibilities fittingly include recruiting eligible schools from the school district partners for the pilot study, supporting project management and coordination across the target area and the school districts, conducting an independent evaluation of TTQ, and leading the dissemination of the project's findings (p. e-30). The applicant innovatively proposes to utilize project management tools such as Airtable and Costpoint to monitor the project's progress and costs. A logically organized project timeline contributes to the likelihood that objectives will be achieved in a timely fashion (p. e-138). A detailed management plan thoroughly lists all proposed activities contributing to the proposed project, milestones and measures for accomplishing the tasks, the organization and individual persons responsible for the tasks and a corresponding timeline that collectively ensures that the proposed objectives will be achieved. For example, in support of objective one, the applicant appropriately proposes to recruit 8 pilot schools that are willing to participate in field test which will be evident through signatures on the project MOU for the 8 schools in the pilot phase and will fittingly be the responsibility of the applicant's partnership team. The recruitment of schools will effectively take place during the Winter, Spring, and Summer of 2023/2024 (p. e-139).

Sub

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not list the time commitments of the trainers which would fully demonstrate that the objectives will be achieved on time and within budget and would support the overall adequacy of the management plan (p. e-179).

Reader's Score: 4

3. **(3) The applicant's capacity (e.g., in terms of qualified personnel, financial resources, or management capacity) to bring the proposed project to scale on a national or regional level (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)) working directly, or through partners, during the grant period.**

Strengths:

The applicant comprehensively demonstrates that it has the capacity to bring the proposed project to scale on a national level in terms of its management experience and qualified personnel. Five key staff with extensive relevant qualifications will support the proposed project. For example, the qualifications of Project Director include experience as a school psychologist with proven knowledge to implement and scale interventions. His responsibilities are aligning the resources with the work performed by partnering organizations. The Implementation Lead is the developer of the proposed intervention and has relevant experience such as providing training in literacy, curriculum adaptation, and collaborative instruction for teachers (p. e-30-33).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses are noted.

Reader's Score: 10

4. **(4) The mechanisms the applicant will use to broadly disseminate information on its project so as to support further development or replication.**

Strengths:

The applicant appropriately demonstrates effective mechanisms to broadly disseminate information on the proposed project to support further development or replication. For example, proposed dissemination activities will include the use of social media, scholarly journals, and publications and conferences aimed at practitioners such as multi-tiered systems of support coordinators, reading specialists, and middle school literacy instructors (p. e- 143). The dissemination plan fittingly supports replication as educators learn about the experience of other educators in utilizing TTQ and about the opportunities and barriers for high-quality implementation. The products to be disseminated will demonstrate the reliable relationship between social-emotional learning, motivation and the development of reading skills which makes the proposed project suitable for replication (p. e-34). The applicant fittingly proposed to publish articles in journals, including peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Exceptional Children, Journal of Learning Disabilities) and practitioner journals and trade publications (e.g., Reading Teacher, Educational Leadership), and present on the results of this project at conferences (e.g., National Center for Teacher Effectiveness, Association for Middle Level Education) which will support further development or replication as the proposed project will provide a valuable tool to increase reading competencies among middle school students (p. e-144).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses are noted.

Reader's Score: 10

5. **(5) The likely utility of the products (such as information, materials processes, or techniques) that will result from the proposed project, including the potential for their**

being used effectively in a variety of other settings.

Strengths:

The applicant effectively demonstrates the need for evidence-based and research-based instructional interventions for middle school students. The proposed project will produce evidence regarding the effectiveness of the reading interventions braided with social-emotional strategies which will provide a useful tool for educators. The reading intervention has a strong likelihood of being implemented in a variety of settings as it provides a viable solution for a Tier 2 intervention that can potentially help struggling readers gain reading proficiency (p. e-34).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses are noted.

Reader's Score: 5

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 the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 13

Sub

1. **(1) The extent to which there is a conceptual framework underlying the proposed research or demonstration activities and the quality of that framework.**

Strengths:

The applicant proposes a logical conceptual framework which assumes that when the three scaling and sustaining strategies are implemented, that students' reading proficiencies will increase. The proposed interventions strengthen the quality of the conceptual framework as repeated readings from the sentence to the passage level, choral reading, explicit vocabulary instruction across multiple contexts throughout the program, and multiple comprehension strategies combined with increasing student background knowledge, the integration of behavioral and social emotional supports with engaging texts, will likely establish reliable findings that support the proposed research (p. e-35).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses are noted.

Reader's Score: 5

2. **(2) The extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are clearly specified and measurable.**

Strengths:

The applicant proposes an appropriate overarching goal to scale and evaluate the effectiveness of TTQ with a diverse set of schools and students (p. e-14). The proposed objectives are clearly stated and correspond to the overarching goal. The objectives include Implementing and refining TTQ scaling supports through a yearlong field test; implementing TTQ at scale with fidelity and determining its impacts; and broadening the project's impact

through dissemination and further implementation (p. e-36-37). Clearly described activities, outcomes, and measures add specificity to the goals and objectives. For example, strategy 1.6 seeks to implement TTQ with a high degree of fidelity in 8 schools (2024-25 school year) with instructors implementing TTQ as designed. The measurable outcome effectively anticipates the average intervention instructor in the pilot phase completing at least 67 out of 75 TTQ lessons across the school year (p. e-36 and e-182). Performance measures effectively demonstrate the extent to which the proposed objectives and outcomes are measurable (p. e-181-184).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses are noted.

Reader's Score: 5

3. **(3) The extent to which the design of the proposed project is appropriate to, and will successfully address, the needs of the target population or other identified needs.**

Strengths:

The applicant mostly demonstrates that the project design is appropriate to and will successfully address the needs of the target population as well as the need to scale and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed project (p. e-14, e-36). Middle school students fall short of reading proficiently, and the proposed project will likely demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed project which can be implemented as a reliable Tier 2 intervention strategy (p. e-38).

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not sufficiently address the needs of all student subgroups such as English Learners and multi-lingual students. For example, the applicant does not propose strategies such as translating instructional materials into other languages so that full access of the proposed project can be assured.

Reader's Score: 3

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Project Evaluation

1. **The Secretary considers the quality of the evaluation to be conducted of the proposed project. In determining the quality of the evaluation, the Secretary considers the following factors:**

Reader's Score: 0

1. **(1) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will, if well implemented, produce evidence about the project's effectiveness that would meet the What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations as described in the What Works Clearinghouse Handbook (as defined in 34 CFR 77.1(c)).**

Strengths:

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Sub

    Weaknesses:

    .

    Reader's Score: **0**

2. **(2) The extent to which the evaluation will provide guidance about effective strategies suitable for replication or testing in other settings.**

    Strengths:

    .

    Weaknesses:

    .

    Reader's Score: **0**

3. **(3) The extent to which the evaluation plan clearly articulates the key project components, mediators, and outcomes, as well as a measurable threshold for acceptable implementation.**

    Strengths:

    .

    Weaknesses:

    .

    Reader's Score: **0**

4. **(4) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment of progress toward achieving intended outcomes.**

    Strengths:

    .

    Weaknesses:

    .

    Reader's Score: **0**

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Competitive Preference Priority 1

1. **Competitive Preference Priority 1:**

Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources and Opportunities: Implementers and Partners (up to 5 points)

Under this priority, an applicant must demonstrate how the project will be implemented by or in partnership with one or more of the following entities:

    (a) Community colleges (as defined in the NIA)
    (b) Historically Black colleges and universities (as defined in the NIA)
    (c) Tribal Colleges and Universities (as defined in the NIA)
    (d) Minority-serving institutions (as defined in the NIA)

Strengths:

A partnership with higher education will facilitate a scholar's group in pre-social work or other fields related to social-emotional learning. The purpose of this partnership is to give pre-social work students an opportunity to observe to what extent a social emotional curriculum will benefit students participating in the proposed project. It will also exchange expertise with the developers of the intervention and generate new ideas (p. e-20).

Weaknesses:

The proposed partnership is not sufficiently described and seems rather minimal in relation to the proposed project. For example, the observations conducted by the pre-social work college students involve a time commitment of only several hours which is not considered a significant partnership in accessing educational resources (p. e-20).

Reader's Score: 2

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