

Merit-Based Review and Selection Process for Competitive Grants Illinois State Board of Education Policy and Procedures

I. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to design and execute a merit-based review process for applications as required for competitive grants. This process is incorporated by reference in all applicable funding opportunities. (See also Section 200.203 Notices of funding opportunities.)

II. Procedures

A. Receipt of Grant Application Proposals

- 1) A record shall be prepared by the respective grant program manager that shall include the name of the grantor and title of the grant. Upon receipt of an application, the name of each grant applicant and a notation of the date and time of the grant application receipt shall be made. All applications received shall be reviewed for compliance with all mandatory and statutory requirements found at <https://www.illinois.gov/sites/GATA/Grantee/Pages/default.aspx>. Applications that do not meet the requirements at <https://www.illinois.gov/sites/GATA/Grantee/Pages/default.aspx> will not be eligible for consideration and will be advised via the grant manager via email.
- 2) Procedures Regarding Curability – The purpose of curing is to allow applicants a second opportunity to resubmit their application at the direction of an ISBE program manager if the original application submission meets certain requirements. This applies to both electronic Grants Management System (eGMS) applications and paper grant application. Procedures for curing are listed in subsection (II)(A)(2)(a) and (II)(A)(2)(b).
 - a. eGMS Applications - With respect to eGMS applications, proposals submitted via ISBE eGrants Management System (eGMS) shall be considered curable only if eGMS experiences systematic or technical difficulties and is unable to accept applications on the date of the NOFO/RFP submission deadline. This does not include systematic or technical difficulties that the applicant may experience on his or her PC, computer, tablet, or other device, including but not limited to internet failure.

In the event that an application is not accepted by eGMS due to systematic or technical difficulties, applicants must email the agency contact listed in the NOFO/RFP:

 - i) Notifying the contact of an eGMS systematic/technical failure; and
 - ii) Requesting instructions for submission information.
 - b. Paper Grant Applications - With respect to paper grant applications, proposal originals and copies not submitted via eGMS shall be considered curable only in the following limited cases: 1) an application is missing entire section(s) in the Content and Form of Application Submission portion of the NOFO/RFP, not including subsections or content that is otherwise incomplete and/or inaccurate; and 2) an application is missing required signature(s) in the Content and Form of Application Submission portion of the NOFO/RFP. Applications with incomplete content or missing pages (outside of required signatures and missing sections) are not curable.

With respect to paper grant applications, within 3 business days of the NOFO/RFP submission deadline, program managers will email curability notices to applicants that qualify under this subsection. The curability notices shall only be sent to applicants with submissions that are eligible to be cured and shall

contain a notice of items missing, what item(s) are needed in order for the submission to be cured, as well as directions for submitting the item(s) within 24 hours (such as address for hand delivery, mailing address, receiver information for ISBE Attachment Manager, etc.). An application not cured and resubmitted within 24 hours of the program manager emailing the curability notice to the applicant will be reviewed as originally submitted.

Curable items listed in the curability notice must be submitted via one of the following methods:

- i. Hand delivered to the mailing address found in the NOFO/RFP;
- ii. By email to the address listed in the emailed instructions;
- iii. Through the ISBE Attachment Manager found at <https://sec1.isbe.net/attachmgr/default.aspx>, using the recipient name listed in the emailed instructions;
- iv. By certified or registered overnight mail to the mailing address found in the NOFO/RFP, postage prepaid, return receipt requested;
- v. By a nationally-recognized, next-day courier service to the mailing address found in the NOFO/RFP that provides a receipt

- 3) The initial due date for applications for a competitive grant program may be extended by the State Superintendent of Education or designee for good cause prior to the due date of the grant. In such cases, a written determination of good cause and rationale shall be made by the State Superintendent of Education or designee. The extended due date shall be published on the ISBE Funding Opportunity RFP/RFA and Award <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Request-for-Proposals.aspx>, the website of the respective grant and included in such other communications as may be reasonable, including by email to entities that have already submitted an application or expressed an intent to submit an application and other eligible applicants. Applicants that have already submitted an application by the initial due date shall be given the opportunity to amend or revise their application by the extended due date.

B. The ISBE grant program manager shall keep a file of the entire grant award process that includes: the Notice of Funding Opportunity Summary Information sheet; the NOFO/RFP; all grant application documents and qualifying requirements, and all notices (including curability notices), correspondence, and written determinations related thereto; record of applications received and evaluated; written evaluation criteria; evaluator Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure forms; individual and summary score sheets; written determinations of awards; Notices of State Award (NOSA); Grant Agreements; and appeal documents and determinations, if any. The grant award file shall be available to federal and state audit organizations, the Office of the Auditor General, and the Executive Inspector General.

C. The evaluation process for competitive grant applications shall include:

- 1) A statement of evaluation criteria in the NOFO/RFP. The NOFO/RFP shall state all criteria and their relative importance, including preferences, technical assistance options, and tiebreakers for equivalent scores after evaluation, if any.
- 2) A statement in the NOFO/RFP identifying if there are multiple phases of evaluation and, if so, a description of the evaluation phases.
- 3) Review based solely on criteria identified in the NOFO/RFP. In the event of a required change to the evaluation criteria prior to submission, the grant applicants shall be informed by publication of the change on the ISBE website, at a minimum.

- 4) Cost sharing when applicable. Cost sharing must be specifically defined as to how it will be considered, such as to assign a certain number of additional points to applicants that offer cost sharing or to break ties among applications with equivalent scores after evaluation of all other factors. Cost sharing as an evaluation factor must include any restrictions on the types of costs that are acceptable (e.g., in-kind contributions).
- 5) Evaluation conducted by a committee. Evaluation Committee members shall be determined by the Assistant Superintendent, Division Administrator, or designee. The Evaluation Committee shall be tailored to the particular grant program and shall include personnel with appropriate technical or other expertise to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of applicants. The Evaluation Committee shall consist of a minimum of three members. Each application shall be reviewed by a minimum of three Evaluation Committee members and each application shall be reviewed by the same number of Evaluation Committee members; however, it is not necessary that each application be reviewed by all of the members of the entire Evaluation Committee.
Further:
 - a. Evaluation Committee members must not have any conflicts of interest or apparent conflicts of interest. Evaluation Committee members must sign a Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure form prior to participation in the evaluation process.
 - b. Grant applicants are not allowed to be Evaluation Committee members for grant programs for which the applicant has submitted an application or if they represent an entity that has submitted an application. Exceptions may be made when required by statute.
 - c. Evaluation Committee members shall be assigned a code for identification of their evaluation process. The names of evaluators may be released for audit and litigation purposes and as otherwise required by law, including but not limited to, the Freedom of Information Act.
 - d. The Evaluation Committee members may be removed by the State Superintendent of Education or designee for due cause, such as failure to comply with directions of the grant application and/or evaluation process or to ensure the integrity of the grant. The State Superintendent of Education or designee shall state in writing his or her reasons for removing a committee member.
 - e. A pre-evaluation meeting shall be conducted with all Evaluation Committee members to give them detailed instructions on how to evaluate the applications received, on the need for complete confidentiality and transparency in their reviews, and to have them complete the Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure forms. Once the instructions are provided and understood and the evaluators have submitted their Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure forms, the applications to be scored, a scoring sheet, and scoring rubric that details the items to be evaluated will be distributed to the evaluators. There will be space for comments on the scoring sheet to reflect the reasoning for their decision in each criteria area.
- 6) Evaluation based on numerical rating, unless another scoring methodology is more appropriate due to the unique circumstances of the grant program. At a minimum:
 - a. Any scoring tool shall reflect the evaluation criteria and ranking set forth in the NOFO/RFP and any subcriteria available at the opening.
 - b. Evaluation Committee members must have an individual score sheet that is completed independent of the whole committee.
 - c. Every score must be supported by comments. Each comment must be sufficiently detailed to demonstrate that the related evaluation criterion was evaluated in accordance with these procedures. Each comment should contain the following elements, at a minimum:
 - i. Relevant details from the application;
 - ii. Relationship of the applicant's proposal detail to the evaluation criterion; and
 - iii. Assessment as to the quality of the applicant's proposal in regard to the evaluation criterion.

- d. A summary score sheet that shows the comparative scores and resulting finalists for award must be completed by the grant program manager. Competitive grant applications shall be ranked from high score to low score.
 - e. Any significant or substantial variance between evaluator scores shall be reviewed and documented and must be explained by the evaluator in the comments area of the evaluator's score sheet. Any such significant or substantial variance between evaluator scores will be discussed in a post-evaluation meeting between all evaluators of the application and the grant program manager, if necessary. If an evaluator determines through this process that he/she has misinterpreted an applicant's proposal with regard to any area of review criteria, the evaluator may revise his/her scoring, as applicable, and any such revision shall be documented and maintained in the grant award file. The ranking of grant applications by score shall be adjusted as a result of any such score revision, if necessary.
- 7) The individual and summary score sheets, evaluator comments, application score ranking, and any revised score and resulting adjusted ranking shall be reviewed by an ISBE Division Administrator or management prior to award notification.

D. Award Process

- 1) A tentative award shall be made pursuant to a written determination based on the evaluation criteria set forth in the NOFO/RFP and successful completion of requirements by the finalist.
- 2) A tentative award letter or email will be sent to potential awardees indicating potential award and the ISBE program manager will contact awardee with additional information.
- 3) A written Notice of Denial shall be sent to the applicants not receiving awards.
- 4) Announcement of the grant award shall be published by ISBE on its Request for Proposals/Request for Application and Awards website <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Request-for-Proposals.aspx> and on www.grants.Illinois.gov.
- 5) After the appeal process is complete, the Notice of State Award (NOSA) will be issued to the selected merit-based finalists that have successfully completed all grant award requirements. Based on the NOSA, the merit-based finalist is positioned to make an informed decision to accept the grant award. The NOSA shall include:
 - a. The terms and conditions of the award; and
 - b. Specific conditions assigned to the grantee based on the Fiscal & Administrative ICQ and Programmatic Risk Assessment.
- 6) ISBE has the sole discretion to modify any of the procedures listed in this Policy as necessary. ISBE will communicate any such changes in procedures.

E. Merit-Based Evaluation Appeal Process

- 1) Competitive grant appeals are limited to the evaluation process. Evaluation scores themselves may not be protested. Only the evaluation process is subject to appeal.
- 2) Appeals Review Officer - The State Superintendent of Education or designee may appoint one or more Appeal Review Officers (ARO) to consider the grant-related appeals and make a recommendation to the State Superintendent of Education or designee for resolution.

- 3) Submission of Appeal
 - a. An appeal must be submitted in writing and received as indicated below. A submission received through postal mail and/or fax is not deemed an acceptable submission of appeal.
 - b. An appeal must be received by 5:00pm of the 14th day after the date that the first grant award notice has been published on <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Request-for-Proposals.aspx> . The appeal must be given in writing, is deemed delivered upon receipt, and must be delivered via email to GATA@isbe.net.
 - c. The written appeal shall include at a minimum the following:
 - i. The name and address of the appealing party;
 - ii. Identification of the grant; and
 - iii. A statement of reasons for the appeal.

- 4) Response to Appeal
 - a. ISBE must acknowledge receipt of an appeal via email or postal mail or signature on return receipt within 14 calendar days from the date the appeal was received. An appeal that does not meet the requirements under subsection (II)(E)(3) shall not be considered a valid appeal for review purposes subject to subsections (II)(E)(4), (II)(E)(5), and (II)(E)(6). Those applicants that do not meet the appeal requirements under subsection (II)(E)(3) shall be notified via email or postal mail. The appeal will be considered closed and additional correspondence concerning the appeal will not be accepted.
 - b. ISBE must respond to an appeal meeting the requirements under subsection (II)(E)(3) within 60 calendar days or supply a written explanation to the appealing party as to why additional time is required.
 - c. The appealing party must supply any additional information requested by ISBE within the time period set in the request.

- 5) Stay of Grant Agreement/Contract Execution
 - a. When an appeal is received, the execution of the related grant agreements/contracts shall be stayed until the appeal is resolved, or the State Superintendent of Education or designee determines the needs of the state require moving forward with the grant execution.
 - b. The state need determination and rationale shall be documented in writing as soon as practicable, and within a maximum of 60 calendar days after receipt of the appeal.

- 6) Resolution
 - a. The ARO shall make a recommendation to the State Superintendent of Education or designee as expeditiously as possible after receiving all relevant, requested information.
 - b. In determining the appropriate recommendation, the ARO shall consider the integrity of the competitive grant process and the impact of the recommendation on ISBE.
 - c. ISBE will resolve the appeal by means of written determination by the State Superintendent of Education or designee, and the written determination will be sent to the appealing party.
 - d. The determination shall include, but not be limited to:
 - i. Review of the appeal;
 - ii. Appeal determination; and
 - iii. Rationale for the determination.

- 7) Effect of Judicial Proceedings

If an action concerning the appeal has commenced in a court or administrative body, the State Superintendent of Education or designee may defer resolution of the appeal pending the judicial or administrative determination.

III. Definitions

- A. Appeals Review Officer (ARO): The person(s) selected by the State Superintendent of Education or designee to consider the grant-related appeals and make a recommendation to the State Superintendent of Education or designee for resolution.
- B. Attachment Manager: The online feature found on the ISBE website by which an applicant can submit his or her cured items.
- C. Capacity: The ability of an entity to execute the grant project according to project requirements.
- D. Curability: The purpose of curing is to allow applicants a second opportunity to resubmit their application at the direction of an ISBE program manager if the original application submission meets certain requirements. E. Curability Notice: Notice from ISBE grant manager to applicant listing item(s) that are eligible to be cured.
- F. Electronic Grants Management System (eGMS): The electronic system by which an applicant can submit his or her application.
- G. Need: Identification of stakeholders, facts, and evidence that demonstrate the proposal supports the grant program purpose.
- H. Notice of State Award (NOSA): Document sent by ISBE to the selected merit-based finalists notifying them that they have successfully completed all grant award requirements
- I. Quality: The totality of features and characteristics of a service, project, or product that indicate its ability to satisfy the requirements of the grant program.