

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

I. Purpose

The purpose of this Merit-Based Review and Selection Process for Competitive Grants Policy (the Policy) is for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to design and execute a merit-based review process for competitive grant applications. This Policy is incorporated by reference in all applicable funding opportunities. See 2 CFR § 200.205; 44 Ill. Admin. Code § 7000.350. ISBE, at its sole discretion, may modify any of the procedures listed in this Policy as necessary, and will communicate any such changes in writing.

II. Procedures

A. Receipt of Grant Applications

- 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 eligibility with all NOFO/RFP, statutory, and regulatory requirements. Applications that do not meet the eligibility requirements will not be reviewed and will be notified via email by the grant program manager.
- 2) All applications must be submitted according to the required procedures in the NOFO/RFP and received by the deadline posted in the NOFO/RFP. Late applications or applications not submitted in accordance with the required procedures in the NOFO/RFP will not be accepted or reviewed. In the event that ISBE's Electronic Grants Management System (eGMS) experiences systematic or technical failures and is unable to accept applications on the date of the NOFO/RFP submission deadline due to no fault of the applicant, the applicant must:
 - a. document any evidence of the eGMS systematic/technical failure via screenshots or, if available, system logs;
 - b. email the agency contact listed in the NOFO/RFP of the failure, and include any evidence that was documented; and
 - c. request instructions for alternate submission.

eGMS systematic or technical failures do not include issues that the applicant may experience on their personal computer, tablet, or other device, including but not limited to internet failure, applicant user error, and/or an applicant's failure to complete all required application information.

- 3) The due date for applications for a competitive grant program may be extended for good cause as determined by the State Superintendent of Education or designee. ISBE shall publish the extended due date at [ISBE Funding Opportunities](#), the website of the respective grant, and 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. Pursuant to [30 ILCS 708/110](#), the ISBE grant program manager shall keep a file of the 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, 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; Grant Agreements; and appeal documents and determinations, if any. The grant award file shall be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and made available to federal and state audit organizations, the Office of the Auditor General, and the Executive Inspector General upon request.

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. Evaluation criteria must include, at a minimum, the following categories of criteria:
 - a. Need: Identification of stakeholders, facts, and evidence that demonstrate the proposal supports the grant program's purpose;
 - b. Capacity: The ability of an entity to execute the grant project according to project requirements; and
 - c. Quality: The totality of features and characteristics of a service, project, or product that indicates its ability to satisfy the requirements of the grant program.
- 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 State Superintendent of Education 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 all members of the Evaluation Committee review each application when the Evaluation Committee consists of more than three members. Further:
 - a. Evaluation Committee members must not have any actual 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 nor may an individual serve as an Evaluation Committee member for a grant program if they represent an entity that has submitted an application for such program.
 - 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 or as otherwise required by law.
 - d. 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 provide detailed instructions regarding the evaluation process, to reinforce the need for complete confidentiality and transparency in their reviews, and to have them complete the Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest Disclosure forms. The applications to be scored, a scoring sheet, and a scoring rubric that details the items to be evaluated will be distributed to each evaluator once the pre-evaluation meeting is complete and the evaluator has submitted their Confidentiality Agreement and Conflict of Interest forms. There will be space for comments on the scoring sheet for each Evaluation Committee member to state their rationale for their score in each criteria area, as required by this Policy.
- 6) Evaluation will be 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.
 - b. Evaluation Committee members must have an individual score sheet that is completed independently of the other committee members.
 - c. Evaluation Committee members must state their rationale for every score, justifying each score with written 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, at minimum, the following elements:
 - i. relevant details from the application;
 - ii. relationship of such details 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 highest to lowest score.
 - e. Any 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 and must be explained by the evaluators in the comments area of their score sheets. 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 must 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. The grant program manager shall make a written record of post-

evaluation meeting and the outcome.

- 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 Department Director or other appropriate management staff 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 merit-based finalist.
- 2) A tentative award letter or email will be sent to merit-based finalists, indicating potential award.
- 3) A written Notice of Denial shall be sent to the applicants who were not selected for awards.
- 4) Announcement of tentative grant awards shall be published on ISBE's Grants Funding Opportunities webpage.
- 5) After the appeal process is complete, ISBE will notify the selected merit-based finalists that have successfully completed all grant award requirements. Based on this notice, the merit-based finalist is positioned to make an informed decision to accept the grant award. The notice shall include:
 - a. The terms and conditions of the award; and
 - b. Specific conditions assigned to the grantee based on the Fiscal & Administrative Internal Controls Questionnaire and Programmatic Risk Assessment.

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 delivered via email to GATA@isbe.net. Appeals submitted through other means will not be accepted.
 - b. An appeal must be received by 5:00 pm of the 14th day after the date that the grant award notice was published at [ISBE Funding Opportunities](#).
 - 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 the reasons for the appeal.
 - d. An appeal that does not meet the requirements under this section shall not be considered a valid appeal. Applicants shall be notified via email of this determination. The appeal will be considered closed, and additional correspondence concerning the appeal will not be accepted.

4) Response to Appeal

- a. ISBE shall acknowledge receipt of an appeal within 14 calendar days from the date the appeal was received.
- b. ISBE shall respond to all appeals 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.