

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

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 06/29/2017 02:04 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Ascend Learning, Inc. (U282M170004)

Reader #1: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Eligible Applicant		
1. Quality of Applicant	45	42
Assisting Educationally Disadvantaged Students		
1. Disadvantaged Students	25	18
Quality of the Evaluation Plan		
1. Evaluation Plan	10	10
Quality of the Management Plan and Personnel		
1. Management Plan/Personnel	20	15
Sub Total	100	85
Priority Questions		
Competitive Preference Priority		
Promoting Diversity		
1. CPP 1	3	0
School Improvement through Turnaround Efforts		
1. CPP 2	5	0
Sub Total	8	0
Total	108	85

Technical Review Form

Panel #3 - Charter Management Organization - 3: 84.282M

Reader #1: *****

Applicant: Ascend Learning, Inc. (U282M170004)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Eligible Applicant

1. Comments should support your recommendation according to the Selection Criteria. Please address each section and provide your scores for each section separately.

Reader's Score: 42

Sub Question

1. The degree to which the applicant has demonstrated success in increasing academic achievement, including graduation rates where applicable, for all students and for each of the subgroups of students described in section 1111(c)(2) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA, attending the charter schools the applicant operates or manages.

Strengths:

The applicant's schools have consistently increased academic achievement for all students. The longer students are enrolled in the applicant's schools the more significant the increases in achievement are. (e29-31) Students show growth over each year they are enrolled, including students in every subgroup. (e32-34)

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 15

2. The extent to which the academic achievement results (including annual student performance on statewide assessments and annual student attendance and retention rates, and where applicable and available, student academic growth, high school graduation rates, college attendance rates, and college persistence rates) for educationally disadvantaged students served by the charter schools operated or managed by the applicant have exceeded the average academic achievement results for such students in the State.

Strengths:

Last year in ELA and Math the applicant's students exceeded the state average in ELA and Math. (e30)

9th grade students surpassed the state average on both Regents exams they took. (e31)

Many subgroups outperformed the state on both Regents exams. (e34)

The attendance rate at the applicant's schools was significantly higher than the state average exceeding it by more than 4 percentage points. (e42)

The applicant's schools have outscored the average students in their districts by 9.4 points in ELA and by 14.3 points in Math. (e29) Last year in ELA and Math the applicant's students exceeded the state average in ELA and Math. (e30) 9th grade students surpassed the state average on both Regents exams (ELA and Math) they took. (e31) All subgroups outperformed their host districts in ELA and Math. (e32) All subgroups outperformed the state on both Regents exams (ELA and Math). (e34)

Sub Question

Weaknesses:

Students with disabilities did not outperform their peers across the state on the Regents Math. (e34)

Reader's Score: 12

3. **The extent to which charter schools operated or managed by the applicant have not been closed; have not had a charter revoked due to noncompliance with statutory or regulatory requirements; have not had their affiliation with the applicant revoked or terminated, including through voluntary disaffiliation; have not had any significant issues in the area of financial or operational management; have not experienced significant problems with statutory or regulatory compliance that could lead to revocation of the school's charter; and have not had any significant issues with respect to student safety.**

Strengths:

The applicant has not had any schools closed or any serious deficiencies found at any of its schools. This includes that they have not ever had a charter revoked or terminated and that they have not had any issues in the financial or operational areas. Furthermore, there have not been any issues related to student safety. (e44)

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 15

Selection Criteria - Assisting Educationally Disadvantaged Students

1. **The significance of the contribution the proposed project will make in expanding educational opportunities for educationally disadvantaged students and enabling those students to meet challenging State academic standards. In determining the significance of the contribution the proposed project will make, the Secretary**

Reader's Score: 18

Sub Question

1. **The extent to which charter schools currently operated or managed by the applicant serve educationally disadvantaged students, including students with disabilities and English learners, at rates comparable to surrounding public schools; and**

Strengths:

Economically the applicant's students are comparable to the surrounding public schools. The rates at which students qualify for free or reduced lunch are very similar. (e46)

This application was thoroughly discussed with respect to each selection criterion and priority. My scores reflect my professional assessment of the application with respect to those criteria and priorities.

Weaknesses:

The applicant's schools serve a lower percentage of students with disabilities and a lower percentage of students who are ELLs than the surrounding area schools. This is a concern because over time the applicant does not seem to have been able to remedy this situation. (e46)

Reader's Score: 3

2. **The quality of the plan to ensure that the charter schools the applicant proposes to replicate or expand will recruit and enroll educationally disadvantaged students.**

Sub Question

Strengths:

The applicant has analyzed areas to locate their schools and chosen those that showed the highest population of educationally disadvantaged students. (e49)

Recruitment will include postcards, leaflets at subways and a variety of paid advertising. (e51)

They will also target doctor's offices, churches, grocery stores and community organizations. (e51)

Materials for recruitment will be translated into Spanish and French. (e51)

Recruitment efforts will also target child care centers and other programs serving students with disabilities and students who are ELLs. (e52)

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 15

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Evaluation Plan

1. In determining the quality of the evaluation plan for the proposed project, the Secretary considers the alignment of the evaluation plan to the logic model for the proposed grant project and the extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the proposed grant project articulated in the applicant's response to application requirement (c) and will produce quantitative and qualitative data by the end of the performance period.

Strengths:

The applicant's evaluation plan is closely aligned to the logic model as evidenced by the detailed outcomes and objectives they describe. (e57-59)

The applicant is utilizing both internal and external evaluation. This allows for a fair and balanced comprehensive approach. (e59)

The external evaluation involves a randomized-control trial. (e61)

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 10

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan and Personnel

1. In determining the quality of the management plan and personnel to replicate or expand high-quality charter schools under the proposed project, the Secretary considers—

Reader's Score: 15

Sub Question

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

Sub Question

Strengths:

The management plan involves detailed phases and specific times in the years when various goals will be accomplished and benchmarks met. It also clearly defines which staff are taking the lead on each objective. (e67-70)

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not elaborate on the ability to keep the project on budget. (e67)

Reader's Score: 3

2. **The qualifications, including relevant training and experience, of the project director, chief executive officer or organization leader, and key project personnel, especially in managing projects of the size and scope of the proposed project; and**

Strengths:

The applicant's team has a wide variety of qualifications including thorough experience in all domains required for this project. This includes experience in starting schools and managing them in all domains including academic, financial and operational. (e72-75)

Weaknesses:

The applicant lacks a chief talent officer. They have identified this as a need given the staff they will need to hire to complete the project. (e74)

Reader's Score: 7

3. **The ability of the applicant to sustain the operation of the replicated or expanded charter schools after the grant has ended, as demonstrated by the multi-year financial and operating model included in the applicant's response to application requirement (g).**

Strengths:

The applicant clearly explains how grant funds will be used and also how as funding draws to an end so do the activities funded by the grant. (e78-79)

The applicant provides a sound explanation of how their financial model will work beyond the grant period and allow them to sustain their work. (e79).

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Promoting Diversity

1. **This priority is for projects that will provide for the replication or expansion of high-quality charter schools that have an intentional focus on recruiting and retaining racially and socioeconomically diverse student bodies (see Section 4305(b)(5)(A) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA).**

Note: For information on permissible ways to meet this priority, please refer to the joint guidance issued by the Department's Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice entitled, "Guidance on the Voluntary Use of Race to Achieve Diversity and Avoid Racial Isolation in Elementary and Secondary Schools" (www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/guidance-ese-201111.pdf).

Strengths:

The applicant notes that they are not applying under this priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant notes that they are not applying under this priority.

Reader's Score: 0

Competitive Preference Priority - School Improvement through Turnaround Efforts

1. This priority is for applicants that both:

(a) Demonstrate past success in improving the academic performance of one or more academically poor-performing public schools by taking over the operation of the school or restarting the school as a charter school; and

(b) Propose to use CMO funds to restart as a charter school one or more academically poor-performing public schools during the project period, to do so by replicating a successful charter school model for which the applicant has provided evidence of success, and to do so by targeting a similar student population in the replicated charter school as was served by the academically poor-performing public school. In accordance with section 4310(2)(B) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA, students who are enrolled in the academically poor-performing public school at the time of restart are exempt from the charter school's lottery.

For purposes of this priority, academically poor-performing public schools may include, but are not limited to, persistently lowest-achieving schools, as defined in this notice and the final requirements for the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program under Title I of the ESEA (<https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/02/09/2015-02570/final-requirements-school-improvement-grants-title-i-of-the-elementary-and-secondary-education-act>); and priority schools in States that exercised flexibility¹ under the ESEA, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (see the Department's June 7, 2012 guidance entitled, "ESEA Flexibility," at www.ed.gov/esea/flexibility, and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's December 18, 2015 Dear Colleague Letter at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/transition-dcl.pdf>).

Note: For applicants proposing to use CMO grant funds to replicate a high-quality charter school by restarting as a charter school one or more academically poor-performing public schools, the CMO's proposed charter school must be newly created and operating under a separate charter and governance than the academically poor-performing public school.

Footnote 1: As of August 1, 2016, States may no longer exercise flexibility, except in the limited circumstances where they implemented interventions previously in priority schools under the SIG program. For additional information related to ESEA flexibility and interventions in priority schools, see section B of the Department's June 29, 2016 guidance entitled, "Transitioning to the Every Student Succeeds Act – Frequently Asked Questions," at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essafaqtransition62916.pdf>.

Strengths:

The applicant notes that they are not applying under this priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant notes that they are not applying under this priority.

Reader's Score: 0

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 06/29/2017 02:04 PM

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 06/30/2017 02:49 PM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Ascend Learning, Inc. (U282M170004)

Reader #2: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
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Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Eligible Applicant		
1. Quality of Applicant	45	42
Assisting Educationally Disadvantaged Students		
1. Disadvantaged Students	25	23
Quality of the Evaluation Plan		
1. Evaluation Plan	10	10
Quality of the Management Plan and Personnel		
1. Management Plan/Personnel	20	15
Sub Total	100	90
Priority Questions		
Competitive Preference Priority		
Promoting Diversity		
1. CPP 1	3	0
School Improvement through Turnaround Efforts		
1. CPP 2	5	0
Sub Total	8	0
Total	108	90

Technical Review Form

Panel #3 - Charter Management Organization - 3: 84.282M

Reader #2: *****

Applicant: Ascend Learning, Inc. (U282M170004)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Eligible Applicant

1. Comments should support your recommendation according to the Selection Criteria. Please address each section and provide your scores for each section separately.

Reader's Score: 42

Sub Question

1. The degree to which the applicant has demonstrated success in increasing academic achievement, including graduation rates where applicable, for all students and for each of the subgroups of students described in section 1111(c)(2) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA, attending the charter schools the applicant operates or manages.

Strengths:

Over a three-year period, the academic performance for students enrolled at Ascend exceeds math and English proficiency of their peers attending district schools, on average +9.4 points in English and +14.3 points in Math.

The applicant provided three-years of achievement on the state mandated test (NY State Common Core exam). Students outperform their peers when compared to the district, city, and state. (page e20).

The graph on page e29 shows that students attending Ascend outperform their community school district in in math and reading in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

Review of the average percent proficient for Ascend and host district students (Table on page 33) reveal that the charter management organization has closed the achievement gaps among students classified as economically disadvantaged, Black, and Hispanic. While the achievement gaps are larger for students with Limited English Proficiency and diverse learning needs, these students' academic achievement in math and reading exceed their peers in the host district.

To accommodate the growing ELL population, the CMO created a research-based Limited English Proficiency (LEP) program, which has led to increases with students tested. (page e32)

In 2015-016, English and math results for ELL students are outpacing the academic performance of students in the host district by 7.3 percentage points in English and 28.3 percentage points in math. During the same time, students in all subgroups had math proficiency rates that more than surpassed students at the host district.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Sub Question

Reader's Score: 15

- 2. The extent to which the academic achievement results (including annual student performance on statewide assessments and annual student attendance and retention rates, and where applicable and available, student academic growth, high school graduation rates, college attendance rates, and college persistence rates) for educationally disadvantaged students served by the charter schools operated or managed by the applicant have exceeded the average academic achievement results for such students in the State.**

Strengths:

In 2015-2016, students outperformed their peers at the state, city, and host districts, including students who are, the applicant asserts, are more privileged than the students attending Ascend. In the most recent year (i.e., 2015-2016), students in grades three to eight outperformed their district peers in both math and reading. (page e31). High school students at Brooklyn Ascend High School (BAHS) outperformed their state and district peers in the New York Regents exam in both common core algebra (83% vs. 72% NYS, 62% NYC) and living environment (86% vs. 78% NYS, 68% NYC).

The charter management organization's attendance and retention rates are acceptable. The comprehensive (i.e., inclusive of all schools) attendance rate (96.2%, 2015-2016) is higher than the host district and state averages, 91.4% (2015-2016) and 91.0% (2013-2014). (page 42). Over a three-year period, the suspension rate has dropped by 5.3 percentage points (from 2013-2014 to 2015-2016). Over a three-year period, the networks expulsion rates are lost to zero with only one student being expelled in the 2013-2014 school year. (page e43)

Weaknesses:

While the most recent 2015-2016 student achievement goals are commendable, Ascend's students did not outperform their state peers in the previous years (i.e., 2013/14 and 2014/2015) (Appendix G: page ee158 to e160). The academic results of students with disabilities lag those of their peers across New York state. (page e34)

Reader's Score: 12

- 3. The extent to which charter schools operated or managed by the applicant have not been closed; have not had a charter revoked due to noncompliance with statutory or regulatory requirements; have not had their affiliation with the applicant revoked or terminated, including through voluntary disaffiliation; have not had any significant issues in the area of financial or operational management; have not experienced significant problems with statutory or regulatory compliance that could lead to revocation of the school's charter; and have not had any significant issues with respect to student safety.**

Strengths:

Since its inception, the network has not closed any of its schools (either voluntary or by district/authorizer). The applicant asserts that it has not had issues with noncompliance with regards to statutory or regulatory requirements. Further, the network has not experienced financial and/or operational issues. (page e44)

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 15

Selection Criteria - Assisting Educationally Disadvantaged Students

- 1. The significance of the contribution the proposed project will make in expanding educational opportunities for educationally disadvantaged students and enabling those students to meet challenging State academic standards. In determining the significance of the contribution the proposed project will make, the Secretary**

Reader's Score: 23

Sub Question

1. **The extent to which charter schools currently operated or managed by the applicant serve educationally disadvantaged students, including students with disabilities and English learners, at rates comparable to surrounding public schools; and**

Strengths:

One of four Brooklyn residents live in poverty. Thirty-eight percent of residents over 25 have a bachelor's degree and one out of four of the residence are college ready. (page e35)

Overall, seventy-nine percent of students enrolled at Ascend schools are African American with the remaining twenty-one percent of students identified as Hispanic. Eighty-two percent of the students enrolled are eligible for free and reduced lunch. (page e35)

Most students live in Brownsville which, per the application, is one of the city's poorest communities. Further, the community suffers from, what the applicant defines as, social distress. Forty percent of families live below the poverty line. A large concentration of public houses is in Brownsville. (page 45) Students attending Ascend's Brownsville schools (Brooklyn Ascend, Brownsville Ascend) as well as those in Bushwick and Canarsie have similar demographic statistics (racial and FRPL) to their peers in the host district. However, the school located the city's East Flatbush neighborhood have more African-American and Hispanic students than its host district. (page e45 – e46).

Weaknesses:

When compared to the state and the community district, the charter management organization serves far fewer students with disabilities and English Language Learners. (page e46). Table 2.1 (student demographics) also highlights that the network educates fewer Hispanic students. (page e295)

This application was thoroughly discussed with respect to each selection criterion and priority. My scores reflect my professional assessment of the application with respect to those criteria and priorities.

Reader's Score: 8

2. **The quality of the plan to ensure that the charter schools the applicant proposes to replicate or expand will recruit and enroll educationally disadvantaged students.**

Strengths:

Recruiting efforts will model the strategies the school is currently using to enroll students. (page e51). For the existing school, the expansion grade will look to fill seats for students who elect to leave the school. Recruiting materials include but are not limited to: postcards, emails, leaflets, and advertising. The network will hold multiple information sessions. To ensure that the communication can be understood, the materials will be translated to Spanish and French.

The strategic outreach will also include building partnerships with agencies such as immigrant support centers. (page e53). During the enrollment period, there will be a native Spanish speaker available to assist parents through the process. Further, the school will work to help non-English speaking parents ELL inclusive.

Sub Question

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses

Reader's Score: 15

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Evaluation Plan

1. In determining the quality of the evaluation plan for the proposed project, the Secretary considers the alignment of the evaluation plan to the logic model for the proposed grant project and the extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the proposed grant project articulated in the applicant's response to application requirement (c) and will produce quantitative and qualitative data by the end of the performance period.

Strengths:

The Ascend's network has five objectives that are centered around the organization's three specific goals: (page e57)

- o Grow: the organization through both expansion and replication (approx.. 4K seats, which will increase enrollment to close to 8K students in Brooklyn)
- o Quality: Economically disadvantaged students in extremely vulnerable neighborhoods with an innovative liberal arts programmatic design.
- o Scale: Develop and replicate a scalable model that provides the network with the following: 1) operational efficiencies, 2) effective talent development protocol, and 3) (by year three) operate on public dollar with no philanthropic support.

The five outcomes that will be measures are aligned to the project objectives. The outcomes include, but are not limited to: recruiting effective teachers, financial benchmarks, climate and control, college/career readiness, performance indicators. (pages e57 to e59).

The charter management organization will hire an independent evaluator to examine the whether the goals have been met and either the educational model supports student learning.

The research design and collection is described on page e62. Evaluation will examine the impact of a student gaining entry to Ascend against the student who was not selected to attend as per the lottery. The data will assess student academic outcomes, non-academic skills, and stakeholder satisfaction (i.e., students, parents, and teachers). Information will include: performance on state-mandated tests, attendance, suspension, and graduation rates, when applicable. At the end of the grant period, there will be four cohorts of high school graduates.

The evaluator will take to ensure that the data is pulled accordingly to meet the evaluation objectives. (page e63)

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

This application was thoroughly discussed with respect to each selection criterion and priority. My scores reflect my professional assessment of the application with respect to those criteria and priorities.

Reader's Score: 10

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan and Personnel

1. In determining the quality of the management plan and personnel to replicate or expand high-quality charter schools under the proposed project, the Secretary considers—

Reader's Score: 15

Sub Question

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

Strengths:

The application highlights the four phases of development. On pages e67 to e70, the applicant outlines the timelines, tasks, and milestones. The first three phases are aligned to start-up task; the last phase is preparing for store opening. The milestones and timelines for the five-year project are described (pages e68 to e70). The applicant explains the work (in each respective years) as follows: January to June; Summer; and Fall.

Weaknesses:

The timeline described in the proposal is high-level and lacks substantive details. It would be helpful if the applicant presented the information in a more succinct manner. As presented, there are no definitive deadlines for key tasks. For example, facility identification is an important deliverable. However, the task is one of many deliverables with no clear understanding of the deadline by which the network must find a location. Additionally, it is not clear who is responsible for completing the assignment.

Reader's Score: 3

2. **The qualifications, including relevant training and experience, of the project director, chief executive officer or organization leader, and key project personnel, especially in managing projects of the size and scope of the proposed project; and**

Strengths:

The charter management organization has a proven track record of success for opening and operating five K 12 charter. Five tenured officers, which include the project director/chief financial and chief executive officers. All leaders have the expertise to grow the organization (page e75).

Weaknesses:

On page e72, the applicant indicates that the network will hire a chief talent and chief operating officer. Both roles are key in implementing the grant with fidelity. There is insufficient information to assess the qualifications of the entire executive team responsible for managing the proposed grant program.

Reader's Score: 7

3. **The ability of the applicant to sustain the operation of the replicated or expanded charter schools after the grant has ended, as demonstrated by the multi-year financial and operating model included in the applicant's response to application requirement (g).**

Strengths:

The network will increase its size from five to 10 K – 12 charter schools. Campuses will grow from nine to 19 campuses. Enrollment will expand from approximately 4,000 to 8,000.

Funds will be used to support the follow replication and expansion efforts:

- o Furniture, equipment, classroom libraries, curriculum materials, and Resident Directors.
- o Scale network office to support schools, enrollment, management fees to fund: curriculum development, leadership and expansion management, a teacher fellowship, and evaluation support. (page e79)

Once the network has scaled, the grant funded expenses such as resident school directors and cost for starting and scaling the schools will no longer be needed. The applicant contends that the schools will be sustained by the

Sub Question

higher enrollment per-pupil funding and network via the increased management fees.

The network has achieved a strong financial position with positive net income and balanced budgets. Further, all other federally funded sources have been identified and there will be no overlap.

Weaknesses:

No weaknesses noted.

Reader's Score: 5

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Promoting Diversity

1. This priority is for projects that will provide for the replication or expansion of high-quality charter schools that have an intentional focus on recruiting and retaining racially and socioeconomically diverse student bodies (see Section 4305(b)(5)(A) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA).

Note: For information on permissible ways to meet this priority, please refer to the joint guidance issued by the Department's Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice entitled, "Guidance on the Voluntary Use of Race to Achieve Diversity and Avoid Racial Isolation in Elementary and Secondary Schools" (www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/guidance-ese-2011111.pdf).

Strengths:

The applicant did not apply for this priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant did not apply for this priority.

Reader's Score: 0

Competitive Preference Priority - School Improvement through Turnaround Efforts

1. This priority is for applicants that both:

(a) Demonstrate past success in improving the academic performance of one or more academically poor-performing public schools by taking over the operation of the school or restarting the school as a charter school; and

(b) Propose to use CMO funds to restart as a charter school one or more academically poor-performing public schools during the project period, to do so by replicating a successful charter school model for which the applicant has provided evidence of success, and to do so by targeting a similar student population in the replicated charter school as was served by the academically poor-performing public school. In accordance with section 4310(2)(B) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA, students who are enrolled in the academically poor-performing public school at the time of restart are exempt from the charter school's lottery.

For purposes of this priority, academically poor-performing public schools may include, but are not limited to, persistently lowest-achieving schools, as defined in this notice and the final requirements for the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program under Title I of the ESEA (<https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/02/09/2015-02570/final-requirements-school-improvement-grants-title-i-of-the-elementary-and-secondary-education-act>); and priority schools in States that exercised flexibility¹ under the ESEA, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (see the Department's June 7, 2012 guidance entitled, "ESEA Flexibility," at www.ed.gov/esea/flexibility, and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's December 18, 2015 Dear Colleague Letter at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/transition-dcl.pdf>).

Note: For applicants proposing to use CMO grant funds to replicate a high-quality charter school by restarting as

be newly created and operating under a separate charter and governance than the academically poor-performing public school.

Footnote 1: As of August 1, 2016, States may no longer exercise flexibility, except in the limited circumstances where they implemented interventions previously in priority schools under the SIG program. For additional information related to ESEA flexibility and interventions in priority schools, see section B of the Department's June 29, 2016 guidance entitled, "Transitioning to the Every Student Succeeds Act – Frequently Asked Questions," at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essafaqstransition62916.pdf>.

Strengths:

The applicant did not apply for this priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant did not apply for this priority.

Reader's Score: **0**

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 06/30/2017 02:49 PM

Status: Submitted

Last Updated: 06/30/2017 10:03 AM

Technical Review Coversheet

Applicant: Ascend Learning, Inc. (U282M170004)

Reader #3: *****

	Points Possible	Points Scored
Questions		
Selection Criteria		
Quality of the Eligible Applicant		
1. Quality of Applicant	45	42
Assisting Educationally Disadvantaged Students		
1. Disadvantaged Students	25	21
Quality of the Evaluation Plan		
1. Evaluation Plan	10	6
Quality of the Management Plan and Personnel		
1. Management Plan/Personnel	20	14
Sub Total	100	83
Priority Questions		
Competitive Preference Priority		
Promoting Diversity		
1. CPP 1	3	0
School Improvement through Turnaround Efforts		
1. CPP 2	5	0
Sub Total	8	0
Total	108	83

Technical Review Form

Panel #3 - Charter Management Organization - 3: 84.282M

Reader #3: *****

Applicant: Ascend Learning, Inc. (U282M170004)

Questions

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Eligible Applicant

1. Comments should support your recommendation according to the Selection Criteria. Please address each section and provide your scores for each section separately.

Reader's Score: 42

Sub Question

1. The degree to which the applicant has demonstrated success in increasing academic achievement, including graduation rates where applicable, for all students and for each of the subgroups of students described in section 1111(c)(2) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA, attending the charter schools the applicant operates or manages.

Strengths:

Data presented indicates the charter schools collectively have outperformed the community school district (CSD) in which they are located, in both ELA and math over the past three years. The charter schools have earned ELA proficiency rates ranging 6% - 13% higher than the CSD and math proficiency rates 9% - 21% higher. Pg. e29 – e30

According to Appendix G and the narrative, the charter schools have outperformed the CSD across most subgroup populations that existed within the schools for the last three years. Additionally, data indicates that the charter schools are increasing proficiency rates year over year indicating consistent increases in academic achievement. Pg. e33 and e279 – e282

The applicant presents data that outlines a 2 year comparison of the charter schools economically disadvantaged population to the state's economically disadvantaged population and the state's non-economically disadvantaged population. The percentage increase of students passing the state test for each year demonstrates that the applicant is realizing greater percentage gains than either state population. ELA gains for the charter schools were 13% compared to 7% for each state comparison group, and math gains for the charter schools were 10% compared to 1% for each state comparison group. While the average proficiency rates at the charter schools were not as high as the state rates (37% vs. 52% and 27% ELA and 40% vs. 55% and 28% math) for either comparison subgroup, the percentage increase year over year at the charter schools indicate that gains are being made to close the achievement gap for the economically disadvantaged students. Pg. e37 – e38

Weaknesses:

The academic achievement increases for the special education population as evidenced by reports in Appendix G are not as consistent as the increases for all other subgroups reported. The percentage of students scoring proficient on the state exams does not increase on a yearly basis. Pg. e279-e281

Reader's Score: 14

Sub Question

- 2. The extent to which the academic achievement results (including annual student performance on statewide assessments and annual student attendance and retention rates, and where applicable and available, student academic growth, high school graduation rates, college attendance rates, and college persistence rates) for educationally disadvantaged students served by the charter schools operated or managed by the applicant have exceeded the average academic achievement results for such students in the State.**

Strengths:

Across all schools within the charter network, all subgroup populations have scored a higher proficiency level than the comparison subgroups across the state. Average proficiency rates are from 4% - 15% higher on the ELA exams and 1% to 19% higher on the math exams. Pg. e35 – e37

The narrative indicates the applicant averaged 96.2% attendance rate during the 2015-2016 school year. This rate is higher than the CSD, which was 91.4%. pg. 42

The applicant reports higher proficiency rates on the Regents exam taken by the 9th graders at Brooklyn Ascend High School across all subgroups, as compared to the state of New York. The charter school average as compared to the state was 11% higher on the Algebra exam and 8% higher on the ELA exam. Pg. e31

Weaknesses:

The comparison of attendance rates between the charter school and the state does not give data from the same school years making it difficult to determine if the charter school is outpacing the state in these criteria. Pg. e42

Reader's Score: 13

- 3. The extent to which charter schools operated or managed by the applicant have not been closed; have not had a charter revoked due to noncompliance with statutory or regulatory requirements; have not had their affiliation with the applicant revoked or terminated, including through voluntary disaffiliation; have not had any significant issues in the area of financial or operational management; have not experienced significant problems with statutory or regulatory compliance that could lead to revocation of the school's charter; and have not had any significant issues with respect to student safety.**

Strengths:

According to the applicant, there have been no issues of noncompliance nor have any schools been closed during the tenure of the CMO. The narrative also indicates the CMO and its member schools have not had any financial or operational concerns. Pg. e44

Weaknesses:

None noted.

Reader's Score: 15

Selection Criteria - Assisting Educationally Disadvantaged Students

- 1. The significance of the contribution the proposed project will make in expanding educational opportunities for educationally disadvantaged students and enabling those students to meet challenging State academic standards. In determining the significance of the contribution the proposed project will make, the Secretary**

Reader's Score: 21

Sub Question

- 1. The extent to which charter schools currently operated or managed by the applicant serve educationally disadvantaged students, including students with disabilities and English learners, at rates comparable to surrounding public schools; and**

Strengths:

The applicant has comparable percentages of subgroup populations as compared to the Community School District (CSD) from which the students would be attending absent these charter schools. Most of the charter schools are located in Brownsville, which has the highest concentration of public housing in the country, thereby attracting a high percent of families in poverty. The CMO has a student population that is 82.5% free or reduced lunch eligible (FRL), 79.1% Black and 22.2% Hispanic. These percentages within the CSD are 83.3% FRL, 60.8% Black and 25.6% Hispanic. Pg. e295

This application was thoroughly discussed with respect to each selection criterion and priority. My scores reflect my professional assessment of the application with respect to those criteria and priorities.

Weaknesses:

According to the information provided, the CMO does not have a comparable percentage of either special education students or ELL students. In many instances, the population of these subgroups is well below that of the community school district's population. (2015 -2016 special education percentage is 13.3% compared to 17%) Pg. e295 and e46

This application was thoroughly discussed with respect to each selection criterion and priority. My scores reflect my professional assessment of the application with respect to those criteria and priorities.

Reader's Score: 6

- 2. The quality of the plan to ensure that the charter schools the applicant proposes to replicate or expand will recruit and enroll educationally disadvantaged students.**

Strengths:

The applicant has conducted a study of community school districts surrounding the existing charter schools to determine where the greatest need for school expansion is located. The study revealed that the geographic areas in which the existing charter schools are located is the area that most closely mirrors the present school demographics which cater to the educationally disadvantaged. This area contains a large percentage of students that qualify for free or reduced lunch as well as students that are educationally disadvantaged by life circumstances. Pg. e49 – e51

A rigorous campaign will be initiated within the identified neighborhoods to recruit students. This campaign will consist of mailings, email campaigns, advertising and outreach activities to local community organizations. This recruitment campaign will be presented in native languages to ensure all families have an equal opportunity to gather information about the new charter schools. Pg. e50 – e51

Because the applicant does not have as high a percentage of special education or ELL students as the surrounding

Sub Question

district schools, there will be additional information provided to institutions that are involved with these students in an effort to attract more of these populations. The applicant will interface with local Head Start programs as well as the Brooklyn Early Childhood Direction Center and other agencies that serve children with disabilities. Additionally, the applicant will interface with businesses and other agencies that support immigrant populations, including churches, immigrant support centers and daycare centers in hopes of recruiting more of the ELL population. Pg. e52 – e53

Weaknesses:

None noted.

Reader's Score: 15

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Evaluation Plan

- 1. In determining the quality of the evaluation plan for the proposed project, the Secretary considers the alignment of the evaluation plan to the logic model for the proposed grant project and the extent to which the methods of evaluation include the use of objective performance measures that are clearly related to the intended outcomes of the proposed grant project articulated in the applicant's response to application requirement (c) and will produce quantitative and qualitative data by the end of the performance period.**

Strengths:

The applicant presents a plan that includes overarching goals, specific objectives and outcomes relating to those objectives. The applicant has developed a logic model based on these goals and objectives. The Logic model is aligned to the project goals and includes both short and long term outcomes based on the activities defined in the plan. Pg. e57 – e59 and e320 – e323

An evaluation plan is presented that includes both internal and external evaluations. Internal evaluation measures are tied to the goals and objectives, determining if school growth and program quality are consistent with the proposed outcomes. The external evaluation will be completed by a researcher from Harvard who will determine if the grant objectives have been met, and will produce a report that outlines the successes of the school model. Pg. e61

Weaknesses:

The Logic Model does not include inputs such as personnel, money, time that will be devoted to the program. Because the objectives are listed the inputs could be assumed, but the Logic Model would have been stronger if the applicant had listed specific inputs. Additionally the long term outcomes are vague. More specificity should have been given as to ideas that will demonstrate the grant project was successful and, because the task of the external evaluator was to determine take outs for use in other situations, these criteria should have been identified in the model. pg. e319 – e323

Reader's Score: 6

Selection Criteria - Quality of the Management Plan and Personnel

- 1. In determining the quality of the management plan and personnel to replicate or expand high-quality charter schools under the proposed project, the Secretary considers—**

Reader's Score: 14

Sub Question

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

Strengths:

The narrative includes general timelines for the opening of new charter schools. Specific areas of responsibility are assigned to individuals with leadership roles within the CMO. These specific areas of responsibility are well defined. Pg. e66 – e75

Weaknesses:

The table provided on pages e26 – e27 lists each existing and new charter schools to be developed through this project. The activities associated with each school are defined by school year. The applicant should have provided more specificity related to what will actually happen either quarterly or monthly for each school. The information provided on pages e67 – e70 is more descriptive, but is still vague in that it defines activities by large blocks of time. The management plan should include a very detailed timeline to ensure reviewers that the applicant has a thorough understanding of specific tasks that must be completed in order to bring the project to fruition.

Reader's Score: 2

- 2. The qualifications, including relevant training and experience, of the project director, chief executive officer or organization leader, and key project personnel, especially in managing projects of the size and scope of the proposed project; and**

Strengths:

The leadership team is experienced in the activities of the CMO in which they are responsible. The Chief Financial Officer who is the project leader is well versed in the financial aspects of the CMO and has worked with federal programs including Title I and the school lunch program. He brings 8 years of charter school experience to this position as well as an MBA from Columbia University. The president of the CMO will assist with the real estate piece of the project. She brings many years of project management to the table. Pg. e75 – e77

Other members of the management team are identified and have relevant experience for their specific roles within the organization. Pg. e77 – e78

Weaknesses:

The application indicates that two new positions will be added to the management team. Job descriptions are available in Appendix I for these positions. The position of Chief Operating Officer (COO) will hold the responsibility for ensuring the process of replication will be codified for use by other CMO's if desired. This is a large portion of this grant project and it is concerning that a new position would have this much responsibility.

Reader's Score: 7

- 3. The ability of the applicant to sustain the operation of the replicated or expanded charter schools after the grant has ended, as demonstrated by the multi-year financial and operating model included in the applicant's response to application requirement (g).**

Sub Question

Strengths:

According to the application, each of the replicated charter schools will be self-sustaining after two years of operations. The grant funding and philanthropic funding that is received will help operate the necessary training programs for future staff along with funding the acquisition of facilities, equipment and supplies. Pg. e78 – e80 and Appendix H

The model presented in the application allows the CMO to support the charter schools during their planning year and years 1 and 2 of operation. After this time each individual charter school is expected to be self-sufficient and not to have to rely on the reserves of other charter schools within the network. This structure also allows the CMO to be financially stable through the money collected from each charter school, thus allowing the CMO to continue to support the charter schools through central office functions of educational program implementation, professional development, assessment data analysis and recruiting leaders and teachers. Pg. e81

Weaknesses:

None noted.

Reader's Score: 5

Priority Questions

Competitive Preference Priority - Promoting Diversity

1. This priority is for projects that will provide for the replication or expansion of high-quality charter schools that have an intentional focus on recruiting and retaining racially and socioeconomically diverse student bodies (see Section 4305(b)(5)(A) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA).

Note: For information on permissible ways to meet this priority, please refer to the joint guidance issued by the Department's Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice entitled, "Guidance on the Voluntary Use of Race to Achieve Diversity and Avoid Racial Isolation in Elementary and Secondary Schools" (www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/guidance-ese-2011111.pdf).

Strengths:

The applicant did not address this priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant did not address this priority.

Reader's Score: 0

Competitive Preference Priority - School Improvement through Turnaround Efforts

1. This priority is for applicants that both:

(a) Demonstrate past success in improving the academic performance of one or more academically poor-performing public schools by taking over the operation of the school or restarting the school as a charter school; and

(b) Propose to use CMO funds to restart as a charter school one or more academically poor-performing public schools during the project period, to do so by replicating a successful charter school model for which the applicant has provided evidence of success, and to do so by targeting a similar student population in the

the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA, students who are enrolled in the academically poor-performing public school at the time of restart are exempt from the charter school's lottery.

For purposes of this priority, academically poor-performing public schools may include, but are not limited to, persistently lowest-achieving schools, as defined in this notice and the final requirements for the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program under Title I of the ESEA (<https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/02/09/2015-02570/final-requirements-school-improvement-grants-title-i-of-the-elementary-and-secondary-education-act>); and priority schools in States that exercised flexibility¹ under the ESEA, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (see the Department's June 7, 2012 guidance entitled, "ESEA Flexibility," at www.ed.gov/esea/flexibility, and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's December 18, 2015 Dear Colleague Letter at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/transition-dcl.pdf>).

Note: For applicants proposing to use CMO grant funds to replicate a high-quality charter school by restarting as a charter school one or more academically poor-performing public schools, the CMO's proposed charter school must be newly created and operating under a separate charter and governance than the academically poor-performing public school.

Footnote 1: As of August 1, 2016, States may no longer exercise flexibility, except in the limited circumstances where they implemented interventions previously in priority schools under the SIG program. For additional information related to ESEA flexibility and interventions in priority schools, see section B of the Department's June 29, 2016 guidance entitled, "Transitioning to the Every Student Succeeds Act – Frequently Asked Questions," at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essafaqstransition62916.pdf>.

Strengths:

The applicant did not address this priority.

Weaknesses:

The applicant did not address this priority.

Reader's Score: **0**

Status: Submitted
Last Updated: 06/30/2017 10:03 AM