

Research to Accelerate Pandemic Recovery in Special Education (84.324X)

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Transcript

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(Slide 1)

Hi, everyone. My name is Katie Taylor and I'm a program officer at the National Center for Special Education Research or NCSER. And in today's webinar, I'll be discussing the Research to Accelerate Pandemic Recovery in Special Education Program.

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Difficulties providing instruction and services during the pandemic have made learners with or at risk for disabilities particularly vulnerable to learning loss. The purpose of this program is to support research designed to speed up post-pandemic learning gains for learners with or at risk for disabilities.

Research supported under this program will be funded by the American Rescue Plan. Projects should address a pandemic-related problem or issue of importance to an education agency, which could include schools, state or local education agencies, or agencies that administer early intervention programs. And they should yield information and/or products that are timely and of direct use to education agencies.

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Proposed research can focus on a wide range of topics. For example, strategies to accelerate academic learning, get students back on track in their social, emotional, and behavioral skills, and/or prepare students for important transitions.

It could also focus on strategies to ensure students with disabilities who suffered trauma, are homeless or in foster care or juvenile justice, or have migrant status are being identified and offered supports. It could also focus on professional development for educators to help students with disabilities recover losses.

It could focus on data-based decision-making practices to identify students in need and implement and revise instruction based on progress, on strategies to improve school-family partnerships and better equip families to support student learning, or on district or school-wide policies or programs that affect students with disabilities.

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The type of research proposed may also be varied. It can include analyzing secondary or existing data only or collecting and analyzing primary data. For instance, it may involve evaluating the impact of interventions, collecting data to inform improvements in intervention implementation, developing and/or

adapting an intervention, or conducting exploratory work to inform decision making.

We know that education agencies are developing and implementing a wide range of strategies to help accelerate recovery for students with disabilities. IES is interested in funding research on these types of strategies that education agencies are already implementing or planning to implement. But we're also interested in research that addresses an issue or a problem that education agencies are facing but not currently addressing.

In general, research should focus on identifying ways to improve interventions and strategies to better identify what works for whom under what circumstances, and to develop ways of generalizing or scaling the use of successful strategies and programs.

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Because this is a new competition, I just want to take a moment to highlight some of the unique or key features of this program. First, the research must directly address a pandemic-related problem or issue that affects learners with or at risk for disabilities and is important to education agencies. Second, research activities should have the potential to significantly and rapidly improve outcomes for children and youth with or at risk for disabilities.

Third, you must demonstrate buy-in and involvement from education agencies. The degree of involvement can vary depending on the project. For instance, projects that involve secondary data analysis only likely don't necessitate an in-depth partnership. However, education agencies should show support for the idea and importance and usefulness of the results. On the other hand, projects that involve evaluating a strategy that an education agency is implementing or planning to implement in response to the pandemic will likely require more in-depth involvement or partnership with the agency.

And then fourth, research should yield information and/or products that are timely and of direct use to education agencies. Given the intent of this program is to provide research-based evidence to education agencies as quickly as possible, IES will not support lengthy projects to develop or adapt interventions. If development or adaptation is needed to prepare an intervention for evaluation, all that work must be completed within the first four to six months of the project. That being said, there could be opportunities for continuous improvement for the purpose of better targeting the intervention or making it more sustainable, scalable, and generalizable.

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Here's some basic information on eligibility, award limits, and deadlines.

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Institutions that are eligible to apply are those that have the ability and capacity to conduct rigorous research, including but not limited to non-profit and for-profit organizations, and public and private agencies and institutions, such as colleges and universities. And IES encourages applications from minority-serving institutions.

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Applications must conform to the limits on award duration and costs shown on this slide.

Budgets should align with proposed project activities. Although a maximum cost is specified, IES expects that costs will vary depending on the type of the research proposed. Estimated ranges are provided to reflect the variety of research questions and designs that may be proposed under these broad types of research. In other words, you don't need to request the maximum duration and maximum budget. Your request should be aligned with the research that's needed to address the pandemic-related problem identified.

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Here's a table of important dates. You'll notice that there are two application deadlines, which I'll talk more about in a minute. The first is August 2nd and the second is September 9th. The possible start dates are different for each. If you apply to the first deadline, your start date can be as early as January 1, 2022, or as late as March 1, 2022. If you apply to the second deadline, the start dates are the same as our typical competitions and can be anywhere from July 1 to September 1, 2022.

Letters of Intent are due June 30th, if you're thinking about submitting to the first application deadline, and July 15th for the second deadline. If you miss the Letter of Intent due date, don't fret, you can still apply. However, I would strongly encourage you to reach out to me or one of the other NCSER program officers to let us know that you plan to apply and discuss your research idea.

And then, there will also be two virtual office hour sessions related to this competition specifically. The first is on July 6th at 2 pm Eastern and the second is on July 30th at 1 pm Eastern. And this will be a time for you to ask questions and hear others' questions about this program.

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Moving on to the general requirements.

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Your application must meet a set of general requirements to move forward for peer review. I'm going to go through each of these in the next few slides.

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First, your research must focus on children and/or youth with or at risk for disabilities. Your sample can include children as young as those in early intervention all the way through post-secondary education.

You can see here on the slide how we define disability and risk for disability. I just want to emphasize that risk for a disability is identified on an individual basis so you should clearly identify the disability or disability categories that your sample is at risk of developing and present research-based evidence of an association between risk factors in the proposed sample and the potential identification of specific disabilities. Evidence consisting only of general population characteristics, such as labeling children and/or youth is at risk for disabilities because they're from low-income families, or are English language learners is not sufficient for this purpose.

I'll also note that learners without disabilities may be included in your sample if appropriate for the research questions. For example, kids with and without disabilities may be educated together in inclusive classrooms. Learners without disabilities could also be part of the comparison population.

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Research must be relevant to education in the U.S. and must address factors under the control of the U.S. education system, which means that your research should take place in or the data you're analyzing should derive from education settings as shown on this slide.

The RFA acknowledges the wide range of formal settings in which education is delivered including homes, natural settings for early childhood special education or early intervention services, childcare centers, preschools, public and private K-12 schools, and alternative schools and settings, and colleges and universities. Settings can also include after-school, distance-learning, or online programs that are under the control of education agencies.

IES does not support research that occurs in informal contexts outside of U.S. education systems.

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Research must address and measure one or more student outcomes that support success in school and afterwards. These may include developmental, school

readiness, literacy, STEM or Science, Technology, Engineering, and/or Mathematics, social/emotional/behavioral, functional, secondary or transition, or postsecondary outcomes.

Outcomes should be assessed using high-quality commonly used measures of broad interest to educators. For example, when state assessment scores or measures of successful progression through education systems such as attendance, progression, degree completion are available, accessible, and appropriate for both the constructs and the learners being assessed, they should be included.

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There is an additional requirement for applicants who submit proposals for the first deadline. Keep in mind that these projects would have an earlier start date, sometime between January 1 and March 1, 2022. So the idea behind having an earlier deadline is that we're trying to support work that needs to begin more quickly during the 2021-2022 school year because of the nature of the project and/or the position that the education agency is in. There is no competitive advantage to applying early.

So the requirement is to describe how the project would meet one or more of the criteria on the slide and this description would go in the significant section of the project narrative. So essentially, you would need to show that the project would involve evaluating an intervention that education agencies are poised to initiate in the 2021-2022 school year, and for which pretest or baseline data will be available or feasible to collect.

Or that the project would involve developing or adapting an intervention that education agencies plan to implement within four to six months of the start of the project. Or that the project would involve analyzing existing data that are available at the time of applying and would inform decisions related to pandemic recovery that education agencies need to make within four to six months of the project. And/or that the project would build upon ongoing research that provides a time-limited opportunity to address meaningful and urgent questions around pandemic recovery by collecting additional data from a current sample, or analyzing existing data to inform decisions that education agencies need to make within four to six months of the start of the project.

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In addition to the general requirements, there are also requirements and recommendations for the project narrative that I'll discuss now.

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In the next few slides, I'll talk about the project narrative, which, along with the appendices, provides most of the critical content of the application. The project narrative for this program must not be more than 15 pages, which may be less than what you're used to with other IES grant applications.

So if the narrative exceeds this 15-page limit, IES will remove any pages after the 15th. In the RFA, we do provide recommended page lengths for each section of the narrative. So the narrative is composed of four sections: significance, research plan, personnel, and resources. And there are specific requirements and recommendations for things to address in each section. The requirements are the minimum necessary for an application to be sent forward for scientific peer review. If you don't address these things, your application will be deemed non-responsive and not move forward for peer review.

The recommendations are meant to improve the quality of your application. The peer reviewers are asked to consider these recommendations in their evaluation of the quality of your application. IES strongly encourages you to incorporate the recommendations into your project narrative.

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The first section is significance and the purpose here is to describe and justify the importance of the problem and the research to address it.

Specifically, in this section, you'll describe the specific pandemic-related problem or issue that the research will address, demonstrate that it was caused by or made worse from the pandemic, discuss its importance to the education agency that will be involved in the research, and describe the scope of the problem or issue in the education agency involved in the research. You may be wondering how to demonstrate that the problem or issue was caused by or made worse from the pandemic. I think you can make this case in a variety of ways. For example, you might cite other research or literature related to how the pandemic has impacted the issue you plan to study. If it's available, you could present data showing the impact or you could describe the context during the pandemic for the setting you propose working in and how that compares to the typical context and how it has affected the issue under study.

You'll also provide an overview of your research including how it will address the identified problem or issue, contribute to accelerating pandemic recovery for learners with or at risk for disabilities, and result in timely and actionable findings for education agencies.

If you propose to further develop or adapt an intervention, you should describe the intervention and its implementation which may include a theory of change. You should demonstrate its feasibility and potential sustainability outside of the context of a research study, and explain how it will be fully developed and ready for implementation within the first four to six months of the project. If you propose to evaluate an intervention, you'll need to describe the intervention and its implementation, readiness for implementation in the proposed context, and, if available, data on its feasibility and promise for improving student outcomes. If you propose to conduct exploratory work, you'll describe the variables and relationships you plan to study and their significance for practice.

A couple of things to point out about this section, the recommended number of pages is five. So we're really looking for you to focus in on the things mentioned in this RFA and not focusing as much on a lengthy literature review. Also, when you're writing this Significance section, keep in mind that reviewers may not be in your field so it's up to you to provide a compelling rationale for the problem or issue and your research.

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The second section is the research plan where you'll describe what you plan to do in the project. This is where you'll specify your research questions and how they will address the problem you discussed in the significance section, as well as your research design methods and data analysis plan and how they will address your research questions. So, you'll describe and justify the research setting, as well as your sample, including the population they represent and a rationale for the proposed sample size. You'll also describe your research design and methods and justify how they are the strongest design and methods for addressing the research questions. I want to emphasize here that alternative designs to RCTs are allowable. It's up to you to justify that whatever design you propose is the best for answering your particular questions. You'll also identify all of your measures, including the required student outcome measures, and discuss their validity and reliability. For projects that involve primary data collection, you'll describe the data collection procedures, or for secondary data analysis, you'll describe the data sets that you'll use and the key variables you'll examine. And if applicable, you'll describe how you will determine the cost to implement the intervention that is the focus of your research. There are some really helpful resources for doing a cost analysis at the link on this page.

While IES will not accept applications that propose to conduct solely qualitative research, the use of mixed methods is encouraged. We also encourage you to include a plan for collecting follow-up data to determine whether the impacts of interventions or strategies designed to accelerate recovery for students are sustained over a longer period of time.

And lastly, we recommend providing a timeline for each step in your project. This timeline should reflect a sense of urgency and for results to be ready in time to inform important decisions related to the problem or issue. A common question I've heard is how to think about the need for timely results within the context of a potentially four-year project. I would advise you to plan a project that will evolve with the changing needs around recovery and that includes multiple opportunities to provide education agencies with findings that can inform decision-making. For example, over the course of an intervention-related project, findings could provide information about how to better target an intervention to particular learners, or how to improve its sustainability or scalability.

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The third section of the narrative is the personnel section and the purpose here is to describe the responsibilities, qualifications, and time commitments of each member of the project team.

So, you'll identify each member of the project team and describe their role, qualifications to fulfill that role, and time commitment. Discuss your team's experience working with the population of learners that your project will address and how personnel will maintain their objectivity. Also, identify the management structure and procedures that will be used to keep the project on track and of high quality. Depending on the level of involvement from the education agency or agencies, you may want to consider including individuals from the education agency as key personnel. This will depend on what type of involvement or partnership you're proposing. For instance, if you're proposing a more in-depth partnership, then including agency personnel as key personnel on the project may make sense.

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The final section of the project narrative is the Resource section. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that the institutions involved in the research have the capacity and access to resources needed to execute the project and disseminate findings and to describe the nature of the partnership with or involvement of the education agency.

So, you'll want to describe your institution's capacity to manage the grant, resources available at the primary institution and any subaward institutions, the nature of the involvement of or partnership with education agencies, and your access to the research settings and any necessary data.

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The project narrative is followed by several appendices listed here. Some of these are required and some are optional.

Appendix A is required and includes two sections, dissemination history and dissemination plan. The dissemination history should include a description of the project team's experience producing findings, and/or products of value to education agencies, and disseminating these findings and products in formats and venues appropriate for education practitioners, policymakers, and/or parents. The dissemination plan should describe the ways you'll disseminate findings to reach audiences that are most likely to benefit including the specific products, presentations, and publications you expect to produce. Keep in mind the key feature of this program is the focus on actionable and timely results to education agencies. So, in developing the dissemination plan, think about multiple opportunities over the course of the project to share important information with agencies that may help guide their decision-making.

Appendix B is optional and can include figures, charts, or tables with supplementary information, like a timeline for your research project, or examples of measures used to collect data for your project.

Appendix C is also optional and can include examples of intervention materials if relevant for your project. Appendix D is required and includes letters of agreement from the education agencies that will be a part of your research or provide data for the proposed research. You can also provide letters for consultants, if applicable. These letters should include enough information to make it clear that the author of the letter understands the nature of the commitment of time, space, and resources to the research project that will be required if the application is funded. Letters of agreement regarding the provision of data should make it clear that the data will be provided in time to meet the proposed schedule. For this program, specifically, letters from education agencies should demonstrate the importance of the problem or issue being addressed in the research, indicate their expected level of involvement in the research, describe the timeframe in which the research needs to be done in order to provide useful and actionable information, and specify a commitment to facilitating access to schools or other education settings needed for the research.

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Lastly, here are some key steps in writing and submitting an application. First and foremost, read the RFA carefully. Second, if you have questions after reading the RFA, email me or another NCSER program officer. If you have general inquiries about the program, then email me. If your questions are more specific to your field of research, then you should reach out to the program officer with the relevant experience, as shown in the RFA. The best thing to do

to initiate a conversation is to email a brief description of your ideas and some questions and we can set up a time to talk. Unlike some other agencies, IES program officers are completely separate from the peer-review process so we're able to work really closely with applicants. And so that can range from discussing and brainstorming ideas to even reviewing full drafts of applications.

Next, I strongly encourage you to submit a letter of intent. If you submit a letter, a program officer will reach out to you about your project. As I mentioned, if you miss the deadline, you can still apply but the letters of intent are helpful for the Office of Science in determining what type of expertise will be needed for the peer review panels.

I also recommend checking out the other on-demand webinars that may be useful to you in preparing and submitting an application. You can also attend the virtual office hours that I mentioned previously. There will be two of these question and answer sessions that are focused on this competition specifically and there are several others that will be offered that may be relevant or useful. More information can be found at the website listed on the slide.

Then to prepare for submitting your application, you should download the application package from grants.gov and also be sure to follow the guidance in the IES Application Submission Guide. This is a separate document that contains important information about on-time submission procedures and IES-specific guidance and recommendations to help ensure your application is complete and received on time without errors through grants.gov.

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So that's all I have for you today. Thank you for listening.