

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH

Assistance Listing Number (ALN): 84.305J

From Seedlings to Scale Grants Program

Request for Applications

Letter of Intent	October 29, 2026	https://iesreview.ed.gov/LOI/LOISubmit
Application Package Available	October 16, 2026	https://www.grants.gov
Application Deadline	11:59:59 p.m. Eastern Time on December 11, 2026	https://www.grants.gov
Possible Start Dates	June 1, 2027	

See the companion IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for guidance on preparing and submitting applications through Grants.gov.

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Part I: Overview

A. Introduction

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) provides scientific evidence to improve education practice and policy and shares that evidence in ways that can be used by educators, parents, policymakers, researchers, and the public. IES was established by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (ESRA – P.L. 107-279), in part to improve academic achievement and attainment, and access to educational opportunities for all learners (ESRA, § 111.b.1.B), with a particular focus on low-performing learners (ESRA, § 115.a.1) and those lacking access to high-quality educational opportunities (ESRA, § 115.a.2.A and 115.a.2.B).

In carrying out its mission, IES must ensure that our work and the work we fund is objective, secular, neutral, and nonideological; free of partisan political influence; and free of racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias (ESRA, § 111.b.2).

Within IES, the National Center for Education Research (NCER) supports a program of field-initiated research to build knowledge and understanding of education practice and policy.

In this Request for Applications (RFA), NCER invites applications for the From Seedlings to Scale Grants program (ALN 84.305J) as part of the Accelerate, Transform, and Scale (ATS) Initiative. IES models programs in the ATS Initiative on the federal government’s Advanced Research Projects Agencies (ARPA) and the National Institutes of Health Common Fund, to generate exceptionally innovative solutions to high-priority issues in education.

Through the From Seedlings to Scale (S2S) Grants program, IES will invest in innovative ideas within an identified focus area through three phases of increasing funding and duration to support ideas as they grow from seedlings to scalable solutions. Projects will incorporate high-quality research, robust solution development, and attention to sustainability and scaling throughout all phases.

Solving big problems requires taking big leaps. In its S2S program, IES is looking for breakthrough solutions to big problems that persist at all levels of the education system. Those solutions may be one or a combination of education products, processes, and state or local policies. Solutions developed under S2S should be both *comprehensive*, meaning they seek to address the entirety—rather than just one aspect—of a problem, and *seamless*, meaning they minimize technological, human, and systemic frictions and can be successfully implemented within education settings.

When brainstorming possible solutions, applicants to the S2S program will need to consider questions such as:

- What is getting in the way of implementing evidence-based practices? How can we reimagine the status quo and innovate to achieve dramatically better outcomes for all students?
- What insights from other fields have the potential to improve the alignment of structures, policies and resources within education systems to allow for transformational systems-level change?
- What makes your solution innovative enough that it might finally solve the identified seemingly intractable challenge facing education, and ultimately lead to improved outcomes for students?

The S2S program invites bold thinkers to apply for funding to grow their transformative ideas from seedlings to scalable solutions. The program is designed to ground that growth in high-quality research and development (R&D). Its phased structure scaffolds sustained attention to both users’ needs and the solution’s effectiveness at improving students’ education outcomes.

Throughout three phases, teams will conduct R&D to refine their understanding of the problem being addressed, to evolve their solution’s theory of change, and to gather evidence of whether—and if so, how and how much—the solution improves education systems and students’ education outcomes. A living document, a solution’s theory of change describes how the solution will work. This includes a description

of the core components of the solution, how users will interact with the solution, and how those interactions will result in the intended outcomes. All components and connections in the theory of change should be supported by existing evidence or should be considered hypotheses to be tested. As the project progresses, teams will test those hypotheses and update their theory of change to incorporate new data and evidence. IES will provide R&D-focused training and resources to project teams throughout the project period via the **ATS Hub** (<https://ats-hub.org/>).

Phase One – Seedling Stage. This phase represents the seedling, a new theory of change and/or educational approach that is just beginning to take root. The work in this stage is in its infancy. During Phase One, teams will have one year to clarify their understanding of the specific problem their project seeks to address, refine their theory of change and the resulting solution they propose to develop through engagement with relevant stakeholders, and build out a detailed plan for further development and testing. Phase One grantees are **not** expected to develop a fully functioning solution but should develop an early-stage prototype. At the end of this stage, it should be clear that the proposed solution could meet the needs of stakeholders but still requires further development and refinement before testing and scaling.

At the end of Phase One, teams will have an opportunity to apply for Phase Two funding. Strong Phase One activities should result in compelling evidence that the solution is worth further investment in Phase Two. IES expects that many teams will not progress past Phase One. Once vetted, some seemingly promising ideas may not be feasible while others may lack strong alignment to users' needs.

Phase Two – Early Growth. Here, the prototype develops into a usable solution that improves student outcomes in a limited setting. Phase Two projects will be selected based on the strength of Phase One activities and Phase Two plans, as evaluated by peer review. Phase Two teams will have two years of funding to develop their concept into a fully functioning solution and refine it as they identify needed improvements, including those that will support scaling. Teams will also test the impact of the solution on students' education outcomes.

Phase Three – Scaling Up. IES may, at its discretion, support additional work in Phase Three. During Phase Three, teams will bring the innovation to maturation, focus on refining the solution based on learning from Phase Two, deploying and evaluating the impact of the solution across multiple settings and contexts, and solidifying the foundation to scale the solution to users. At the end of this phase, the innovation is usable and improves student outcomes at scale, demonstrating evidence-based impact across diverse education settings.

For the FY 2027 S2S competition, IES invites applications for Phase One projects under the C-STEP – Coordinating Systems to Translate Evidence into Policy and Practice focus area. More details about the expectations for Phase One projects are described in [Part II](#).

For fiscal year (FY) 2027, IES intends to fund up to 12 C-STEP Phase One projects. IES may consider making additional awards to high-quality applications that remain unfunded after 12 awards are made should resources permit.

IES expects all IES-funded research to implement the Standards for Excellence in Education Research, or SEER (<https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/standards-excellence-education-research-seer>). The 2027 Standards (SEER 27) are organized into 4 domains.

- Domain 1. Objectivity and Scientific Integrity
- Domain 2. Relevance
- Domain 3. Open Science
- Domain 4. Intervention Research

Each application for IES funding is required to describe how their project is aligned with applicable standards in SEER 27 (see [Appendix F](#)).

B. C-STEP — Coordinating Systems to Translate Evidence into Policy and Practice – Phase One

What if education and policy leaders had the tools to rapidly and coherently incorporate evidence about the policies, practices, and programs with the greatest potential to address intractable problems in their education system so that the education outcomes of their students are dramatically improved?

Advances in technology, coupled with a growing evidence base in education, have created a significant opportunity for breakthrough, systems-level solutions. State and local education leaders often know the outcomes they seek to achieve, such as improved reading achievement, but may struggle to identify the underlying factors that impede progress. While leaders may recognize a proximal cause, such as low-quality instructional materials, other factors (e.g., chronic absenteeism) may also contribute to poor student outcomes but not be immediately apparent.

Increasingly, data from across education systems can be integrated to examine multiple factors that influence outcomes. When paired with evidence about what works, for whom, and under what conditions, such data can enable leaders to model potential interventions and anticipate their likely effects before implementing changes. However, the complexity and fragmentation of data and evidence across education systems make evidence-informed decision-making challenging.

Key questions remain:

- How can education leaders identify the factors that are most critical to address at a given point in time and most likely to improve student outcomes?
- How can they determine which evidence-based programs, policies, and practices are both responsive to those factors and feasible within their local context?
- How can they identify the conditions necessary for successful implementation, estimate the full costs of implementation, and determine which resources can be leveraged to support it?

More broadly, how can education leaders use complex and interconnected data to improve system performance and student outcomes, both now and in the future? What interoperable technologies can address these needs and be integrated into a comprehensive solution suite for education leaders?

Artificial intelligence and related technologies have the potential to address these challenges. Applications of AI and technology could include knowledge networks that connect evidence on programs, practices, policies, and implementation costs; dashboards that illuminate key system inputs and outcomes; tools that identify both intended and unintended consequences of implementation; and modeling platforms that allow users to explore how alternative implementation strategies may affect outcomes. Together, these technologies could provide school-, district-, and state-level leaders with actionable roadmaps for improving implementation and student success.

Lessons from other sectors may yield valuable insights. Education is not unique in facing complex challenges shaped by multiple interacting factors. Systems thinking and modern technological infrastructure have transformed sectors such as healthcare and business, yet these approaches remain underutilized in education. Because innovation often emerges at the intersection of disciplines and sectors, IES seeks ideas inspired by successful technological solutions from other fields that have the potential to transform education research and practice.

C-STEP seeks to develop and rigorously test innovative AI- and technology-enabled solutions that help education systems intentionally integrate evidence-based products, processes, and policies to improve outcomes for prekindergarten through grade 12 students. Proposed solutions should reflect a deep understanding of the systems in which they operate and enable education leaders to align resources, anticipate impacts, and overcome implementation barriers, thereby strengthening the connection between research, policy, and practice.

Strong proposals will address the root causes of implementation failure rather than focus on a single proximal cause impeding progress. IES expects solutions to be grounded in rigorous research on complex systems and organizational change and encourages applicants to draw on expertise from diverse scientific disciplines and industry sectors. Collectively, the projects funded through this program should make meaningful progress toward equipping education systems with the tools needed to implement and scale evidence-based policies, programs, and practices that produce dramatically improved outcomes for learners.

C. General Requirements

Applications **must meet the general requirements** below to receive scientific peer review.

1. Award Limits

The maximum award amount and duration for a S2S C-STEP Phase One project is \$500,000. The maximum grant duration is 1 year. **Applicants to this program must not exceed the limits on award duration and cost per year** and should request the actual duration and amount of funding necessary to conduct the proposed scope of work, rather than the maximums allowable by IES.

In your application, provide a detailed budget justification that explains how the requested costs are allowable, allocable, and reasonable (see 2 CFR 200, Subpart E; <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200/subpart-E>) and reflect the proposed scope of work. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for information about completing the SF 424 Research and Related Budget form that is included in the application package available through Grants.gov and for information about what should be included in the budget justification.

2. Education Setting

Your proposed solution **must** be relevant to education in the United States and **must** address factors under the control of U.S. education systems.

D. Getting Started

1. Technical Assistance for Applicants

IES offer virtual office hours (<https://ies.ed.gov/funding/help>) for general guidance on grant writing and submitting your application and choosing the appropriate competition. The ATS-Hub also provides resources for applicants to this competition (https://ats-hub.org/resources/?tx_category=applicant-support).

The program officer for this grant competition is Dr. Akilah Nelson (Akilah.Nelson@ed.gov).

2. Letter of Intent

IES strongly encourages applicants to submit a letter of intent on the IES Peer Review website (<https://iesreview.ed.gov/LOI/LOISubmit>). The letter of intent is non-binding and optional but strongly recommended. IES staff use the information in letters of intent to identify the expertise needed for the scientific peer review panels and to secure enough reviewers to handle the anticipated number of applications. See [Part IV.C.1](#) for more information on what to include in your letter of intent.

3. Eligible Applicants

Institutions that have the ability and capacity to conduct scientifically valid research are eligible to apply. Eligible applicants include, but are not limited to, institutions of higher education and non-profit, for-profit, public, or private organizations and entities.

4. Project Team

IES R&D projects demand project teams with a wide variety of expertise to help ensure the R&D is of high quality. The range of expertise needed for projects funded through this competition is described under Team Capacity in [Part II.C.2.c](#).

Applications should include as key personnel all team members who will make substantial contributions to the work. Describe key personnel in the personnel section of the project narrative and include their biographical sketches as file attachments in the application. Key personnel will be listed on the grant award notification (GAN) when IES makes a new award.

The Principal Investigator (PI) is the primary point of contact with IES. The PI has the authority and responsibility for the proper conduct of the R&D, including the appropriate use of federal funds and the submission of required scientific progress reports. The PI is designated by the institution submitting the application. Other personnel having authority and responsibility for the research and use of grant funds should be designated as co-Principal Investigators (co-PIs). Only one PI may be identified as the PI for the purposes of making a grant award, regardless of whether more than one person will share the authority and responsibility for leading and directing the proposed R&D. The PI and any co-PIs will be listed on the grant award notification (GAN) when a new award is made. You may identify anyone to serve as a co-PI on a grant, including members of the project team who are at different institutions or those who may be serving as a consultant. Co-Investigators (co-Is) may also be listed on the GAN at the awardee's discretion.

While not required at the time of application, all key personnel must have a persistent identifier (PID), such as an ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID; <https://orcid.org/>) at the time of award. For all key personnel who have a PID at the time of application, include the PID in the biographical sketch and in the "Credential, e.g., agency login" field on the Research and Related Senior/Key Person Profile (Expanded) form in the application package. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for more information about this form in the application package. All key personnel must have a PID as a condition of award.

5. RFA Organization and the IES Application Submission Guide

To submit a compliant, responsive, and timely application, you will need to review two documents:

1. This RFA provides information on how to prepare an application that is compliant with and responsive to the requirements. [Part I](#) provides an overview of this grant program. [Part II](#) provides details on application requirements and provides recommendations for what is expected in a strong application. [Part III](#) provides information about general formatting and the other narrative content for the application. [Part IV](#) provides general information on competition regulations and the review process. [Part V](#) provides a checklist that you can use to ensure you have included all required application elements to advance to scientific peer review. [Part VI](#) provides the program code to enter in Item 4b of the SF 424 Application for Federal Assistance form.
2. The IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) provides important information about how to find, complete, and submit an application package in Grants.gov and IES-specific guidance and recommendations to help you ensure your application is complete and received without errors on time through Grants.gov.

We strongly recommend that both the PI and the authorized organization representative (AOR) read both documents.

6. Ensuring Your Application is Forwarded for Scientific Peer Review

Only compliant and responsive applications received before the date and time deadline are peer reviewed for scientific merit and practical significance. The PI and the AOR should work together to ensure that the application meets these criteria.

a) On-time submission

- Received and validated by Grants.gov **no later than 11:59:59 p.m. Eastern Time on December 11, 2026**

b) Compliance

- Includes the **required project narrative** (see [Part II.B](#))
- Adheres to all **formatting requirements** (see [Part III.B](#))
- Adheres to all **page limit maximums** for the project narrative and appendices. IES will remove any pages above the maximum before forwarding an application for scientific peer review.
- Includes the required appendix (see [Part III.C](#))
 - [Appendix F: Alignment with SEER 27](#)

c) Responsiveness

- Meets the **general requirement** (see [Part I.C](#))
- Meets all **project narrative requirements** (see [Part II.B.1](#))

E. Changes in the FY 2027 Request for Applications

Everyone involved in preparing and submitting an application, whether new or revised, should carefully read all relevant parts of this RFA. Major changes to the From Seedlings to Scale grants program for FY 2027 are listed below and described fully in relevant sections of the RFA.

- IES updated the focus of the Phase One competition.
- IES added a new required appendix, Alignment with SEER 27. [Appendix F](#) must include information about how the project aligns with the current Standards for Excellence in Education Research (SEER; <https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/standards-excellence-education-research-seer>).
- IES added guidance on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in preparing grant applications to [Part III.A](#). The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the development of grant applications is allowable. Applicants submitting a grant application must certify on the standard application form to the “true, complete, and accurate” nature of all of the contents of their grant application, regardless of whether it is generated by AI (<https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2025-16571>).
- IES added two new pre-award requirements.
 - If your application is being considered for funding, IES program officers will review the completeness and acceptability of the information in [Appendix F: Alignment with SEER 27](#) prior to making the new award.
 - All recipients of IES research and research training funds are required to be in compliance with the research security requirements described in [Part IV](#) prior to receiving IES funding.

Part II: Program Requirements and Recommendations

A. Phase One Scope of Work

The goal of Phase One is to formulate a deep understanding of the perceived need, identify a solution, articulate how the proposed solution would solve the problem, and create an early-stage prototype to demonstrate that the solution can fulfill the needs of the end users. This understanding will inform three deliverables, described in more detail below: a Proof-of-Concept Report, an Early-Stage Prototype, and an R&D Plan.

By the end of Phase One, teams should be able to answer the following questions using the ideas and data presented in their Phase One application as a starting point, and then adding the lessons learned from their Phase One work:

- What exactly are you aiming to change? How will the solution improve things?
- Do relevant stakeholders believe the specific problem the solution is addressing is a pressing problem?
- Do potential users think this solution addresses the specific problem you aim to solve? Do they believe it is worth trying?
- What are the core components that must be included in an initial, fully functioning version of the solution? How will you know if it works?
- What is your theory of change? What assumptions are embedded in the theory of change that need to be tested before building the solution?
- Do relevant stakeholders believe the solution could have a large impact on student education outcomes?
- What evidence do you have that the solution could be scaled to have broad and meaningful effects on the U.S. education system and student education outcomes?

Some examples of activities that teams could undertake to answer these questions include defining end users and their requirements, developing a needs hypothesis, developing key performance indicators or other indicators of success, defining the core components of their solution, iteratively testing a prototype to validate the problems they're trying to solve and their proposed solution pathway, conducting a competitive analysis, or creating a customer value proposition. See the Invent stage of the Learn to Scale Toolkit for more information (<https://ats-hub.org/learn-to-scale-toolkit/>).

Project teams are expected to participate in capacity building activities hosted by the **ATS Hub** (<https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/awards/accelerate-transform-scale-ats-hub>; <https://ats-hub.org/>). Teams will receive training and resources to support team science and establishing shared language within an interdisciplinary team, upskilling in R&D approaches, entrepreneurial skills, scaling and sustainability, and other topics identified by the Hub and the needs of the teams. The Hub hosts two one-day convenings in Washington DC for all project teams. These include a workshop in late summer/early fall 2027 and a demo day in early 2028. The workshop will provide training to Phase One project teams on a to-be-identified topic identified by the ATS Hub in collaboration with the Phase One project teams and, at the demo day, teams will present an early-stage prototype of their solution to IES staff and other ATS Initiative stakeholders.

Teams will prepare to present their case that their solution should move on to Phase Two through **three core Phase One deliverables**. These deliverables are:

- A **Proof-of-Concept Report** that documents the activities undertaken to answer the questions above and details user needs; market opportunities; solution-market fit; requirements to build and/or implement the product, process, or policy; and potential for improving students' education outcomes. This report should also include a refined theory of change that incorporates data and information gathered in Phase One and clearly articulates the core components of the solution and how and by whom it will be implemented. The Proof-of-Concept Report should provide compelling evidence grounded in stakeholder input that the proposed solution could produce substantial improvements to student education outcomes if successfully implemented at scale. The information included in the Proof-of-Concept Report will be used to assess the likelihood that the breakthrough potential of your solution will be realized.
- An **Early-Stage Prototype** shared at demo day. Given the breadth of possible solution concepts across funded project teams, each team's prototype will be unique, but all prototypes should facilitate testing aspects of design, usability, and functionality. The purpose of the Demo Day presentation is to obtain initial feedback, which will be used by grantees to refine the early-stage prototype.
- An **R&D Plan**, which details the work that would be undertaken in Phase Two if the project receives additional funding. This plan should include the following components:
 - A timeline for Phase Two activities
 - A high-level description of activities that will be needed to develop a fully functioning version of the solution, including:
 - Testable hypotheses generated from the theory of change that will need to be validated before building a fully functioning solution. For any link in the theory of change, the team should ask, "How do we know this is true/this will happen?" If the answer for any link is unclear, it is a hypothesis that must be tested before investing resources in building the full solution.
 - A plan that articulates how data collection will be built into the solution to facilitate continuous improvement and research. The plan should include the meaningful constructs that are important to measure, how they are operationalized as measurable data points, and how you plan to collect and consolidate the resulting data.
 - A plan to refine the solution.
 - A high-level description of how an impact test of the fully functioning solution on student education outcomes would be designed.
 - A plan describing how key staff leading Phase Two tasks would be identified, given that the expertise and experience required for Phase One and Phase Two work will be different.
 - Commitments from additional staff or partners needed to complete the Phase Two work.
 - A plan for securing necessary research approvals and data access, which may include IRB approval, district or school research approvals, and data use agreements.

B. Project Narrative Requirements and Recommendations

The project narrative **must** include three sections: Breakthrough Potential, Research and Development Strategy, and Team Capacity. The three sections of the project narrative **must** include the content below to be responsive to the requirements of this RFA. Applications lacking this specific content will not receive peer review.

The project narrative **must** adhere to the formatting guidelines (see [Part III.B](#)) and be no more than 8 pages. If the narrative exceeds this page limit, IES will remove any pages after the 8th page of the narrative.

An application that meets the project narrative requirements alone doesn't necessarily constitute a strong application; see Recommendations for Strong Applications ([Part II.C](#)) for recommendations to improve the quality of the application.

1. Project Narrative Requirements

a) Breakthrough Potential

The purpose of this section is to explain the potential for your solution to result in a breakthrough in improving students' education outcomes.

- You **must**
 - Identify which aspects of an evidence-informed education system your to-be-developed technological tool will address.
 - Identify the student education outcome(s) your solution is intended to improve.
 - Describe your proposed solution.
 - Describe the PreK-12 education setting and sample that is the focus of your project.

b) Research and Development Strategy

The purpose of this section is to describe your approach to carrying out the Phase One scope of work.

- You **must**
 - Describe your team's approach to carrying out the Phase One scope of work.

c) Team Capacity

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that your team has the capacity to carry out the R&D activities in Phase One.

- You **must**
 - Describe your team.

2. Recommendations for Strong Applications

IES provides these recommendations to improve the quality of the application. The recommendations support (1) applicants in writing applications and (2) reviewers in evaluating applications that align with IES's expectations of high-quality research that has transformative potential and scientific merit. IES asks reviewers to use these recommendations, in conjunction with their professional judgment and expertise, to determine application quality.

a) Breakthrough Potential

Describe your project, recognizing that this application will include initial ideas that need to be refined during Phase One. Your responses here should reflect your current thinking and should highlight areas that you intend to confirm or refine in Phase One. Responses should demonstrate understanding of the

education systems and the context(s) where the proposed solution will be implemented.

Your description should answer the following questions:

- What is the specific problem you're trying to solve that will enable the translation of evidence into policy and practice? What data and other evidence demonstrate that this problem is a need for education leaders, educators, students, and/or communities?
- What is the proposed solution? Who is it for? How do AI and technology enable the development of the proposed solution?
- Why will it work? What practice or research evidence supports this solution?
- How will you know if it worked? What outcomes do you expect to change and on what timeline?
- Why do you think the solution will have a large impact on the education system and its students?
- Why does your idea have breakthrough potential?
 - What barriers will the solution overcome?
 - Why hasn't this solution been developed yet?
 - What is new in your approach and why do you think it will be successful?
- What open questions need to be addressed in Phase One to increase confidence that this solution is likely to impact the education system and student education outcomes and could successfully scale?
- Who would need to be involved to adopt and implement the solution? Who are the relevant decision makers who could influence long term success?
- What is the strategy you expect to use to scale up the solution so that it has broad and meaningful impacts on the US education system?

Specify an initial theory of change that draws on insights from the education sciences and other relevant research. The theory of change should identify the mechanisms through which the proposed solution could intentionally integrate evidence and data into their system(s) so as to improve students' education outcomes. This theory of change should describe how the solution will work, including core components, how users will interact with it, and how those interactions will result in the intended outcomes.

b) Research and Development Strategy

Describe your proposed approach to completing the Phase One scope of work outlined above.

Detail the proposed scope of work, including specific activities planned to refine your understanding of the problem, iterate on the solution concept, develop an assessment of solution-market fit, and develop an early-stage prototype.

Describe plans to address open questions about the proposed solution and how it will function to improve education outcomes at scale.

c) Team Capacity

IES encourages applicants to the S2S program to use the phased structure of the program to build out a multidisciplinary team that has experience in areas such as solution development, technological R&D, AI, human-centered design, organizational design, systems thinking, bringing solutions to market, education policy and practice, and rigorous education research. Applicants should consider including researchers

from disciplines not traditionally represented in the education sciences and individuals from technology development companies and small businesses to the extent that they would be relevant for R&D of the proposed solution.

Applicants should identify the core team that is necessary to accomplish the Phase One scope of work.

- For Phase One, only a subset of team capabilities are required, as the scope of work will focus on user and market research and solution design.
- Clearly articulate roles for each team member who will be involved in Phase One, what aspects of the scope of work they will contribute to, the amount of time they will devote to this project, and how their experience and training relate to their role.

Describe a plan for how to build out a multidisciplinary team in preparation for Phase Two, which includes an expanded scope of work that will involve a stronger emphasis on research and on developing and preparing a solution for scaling. The plan may involve training and professional development for the core Phase One project team and/or additional staff who will be added should the team be selected to progress to Phase Two.

Part III: Preparing Your Application

A. Overview

The application contents—individual forms and their PDF attachments—represent the body of an application to IES. Read the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) to learn how to prepare a complete application that is submitted on time through Grants.gov (<https://www.grants.gov/>).

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the development of grant applications is allowable. Applicants submitting a grant application must certify on the standard application form to the “true, complete, and accurate” nature of all of the contents of their grant application, regardless of whether it is generated by AI (<https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2025-16571>).

B. General Formatting

To ensure that reviewers can read your applications and that all applicants have similar expectations for length and space, IES specifies the following formatting conventions. These requirements apply to the PDF file as submitted, unless otherwise specified. For an application to be compliant and sent forward for review, the applicant should ensure that each narrative section follows both the page limit maximums and the formatting guidelines below unless otherwise specified.

1. Page and Margin Specifications

For all IES grant applications, a “page” is 8.5 in. x 11 in. on one side only with 1-inch margins at the top, bottom, and both sides.

2. Page Numbering

Add page numbers using the header or footer function and place them at the bottom or upper right corner for ease of reading.

3. Spacing

Text must be single spaced.

4. Font and Type Size

Use a font that is 12-point.

Use one of the following fonts: Times New Roman, Courier, Courier New, or Arial. Font size for tables, figures, charts, and diagrams may be 10-point.

5. Citations

Use the parenthetical author-date style for citations (for example, the American Psychological Association, 2009) rather than numeric citations that correspond to the reference list.

C. Required and Optional Appendices

The required project narrative (see [Part II.B.](#)) is followed by several appendices. Some of these appendices are required and some are optional. When you submit your application through Grants.gov, you will **create a single PDF file that contains the project narrative and all appendices and include it as an attachment in the application package.** Include appendices in alphabetical order and simply skip an appendix if it is not required for your application or if you choose not to include an optional

appendix. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for more information about preparing and submitting your application using the required application package for this competition through Grants.gov (<https://www.grants.gov/>).

The research project narrative and appendices are critical parts of the IES application because they include the substantive content that will be reviewed for breakthrough potential and scientific merit.

1. Appendix A: Engagement and Dissemination Plan (Not Applicable/Do Not Submit)

Appendix A is not applicable to this RFA. Any content will be removed prior to review of the application.

2. Appendix B: Response to Reviewers (Not Applicable/Do Not Submit)

Appendix B is not applicable to this RFA. Any content will be removed prior to review of the application.

3. Appendix C: Supplemental Materials (Optional)

Appendix C **must** meet the general formatting guidelines and be **no more than five pages**. If Appendix C exceeds this page limit, IES will remove any pages after the fifth page of the appendix before it is forwarded for peer review.

In Appendix C, you may include figures, charts, or tables with supplementary information. For example, you may include a timeline for project activities, a diagram of the management structure of your project team, a visual representation of your initial theory of change, or examples of measures used to collect data and evidence from stakeholders such as surveys and observation and interview protocols.

These are the only materials that may be included in Appendix C; IES will remove all other material prior to review of the application.

4. Appendix D: Letters of Agreement (Optional)

Appendix D **must** meet the general formatting guidelines. There is **no recommended page length** for Appendix D. In Appendix D, you may provide letters of agreement from schools, colleges, districts, and/or other settings, organizations, or data sources that will participate in or provide data for the research activities and/or individuals who will serve as consultants. You may also use this appendix to provide copies of letters that provide clear evidence of the importance of the identified problem. Letters of agreement should make it clear that the author of the letter understands the nature of the problem and proposed solution, the time commitment and timing of participation, and the unique point of view they can bring to the R&D process.

Ensure that the letters reproduce well so that reviewers can easily read them. Do not reduce the size of the letters. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for guidance regarding the size of file attachments.

These are the only materials that may be included in Appendix D; IES will remove all other material prior to review of the application.

5. Appendix E: Data Sharing and Management Plan (Not Applicable/Do Not Submit)

Appendix E is not applicable to this RFA. Any content will be removed prior to review of the application.

6. Appendix F: Alignment with SEER 27 (Required)

In Appendix F, you **must** include a table describing the alignment of your application with the standards in SEER 27 (<https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/standards-excellence-education-research-seer>). Appendix F

must meet the general formatting guidelines and be **no more than three pages** including the required table. If Appendix F exceeds this page limit, IES will remove any pages after the third page of the appendix before it is forwarded for scientific peer review.

Fill in the table below with a high-level summary of how your proposed project aligns with each domain/standard in SEER 27 and refer back to the location in the narrative where additional details about project alignment are included. If a particular domain/standard is not relevant for your project, mark not applicable.

<i>SEER Domain/ Standard</i>	<i>High-level summary of how your proposed project meets these standards</i>	<i>Pages in Narrative and/or Appendix</i>
Domain 1	Objectivity and Scientific Integrity	
Theory and Hypotheses		
Research Design		
Communication of Uncertainty		
Integrity		
Conflicts of Interest		
Domain 2	Relevance	
Relevant and Student-Outcomes Focused		
Engagement		
Generalizability		
Design for Scale	<i>Applicable only to development and impact evaluations.</i>	
Domain 3	Open Science	
Pre-registration		
Open Data		
Open Methods		
Open Access		

Domain 4	Intervention Research <i>Only complete Domain 4 if you are conducting a development study or an impact evaluation.</i>	
Core Components		
Implementation and Treatment Contrast	<i>Applicable only to impact evaluations.</i>	
High Quality Measures		
Distal Outcomes		
Cost and Cost-Effectiveness Analysis	<i>Cost analysis is applicable to development and impact evaluations. Cost-effectiveness analysis is applicable only to impact evaluations.</i>	

This appendix will not be part of scientific peer review. IES program officers will be responsible for reviewing the information in this appendix.

This is the only material that may be included in Appendix F; IES will remove all other material prior to review of the application.

D. Other Narrative Content

In addition to the project narrative and required and optional appendices (see above), you will also prepare a project summary, a bibliography and references cited, an exempt or non-exempt research on human subjects narrative, and biographical sketches for key personnel and consultants to include as file attachments in your application. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for more information about preparing and submitting your application using the required application package for this competition on Grants.gov (<https://www.grants.gov/>).

1. Project Summary

You **must** submit the project summary as a separate PDF attachment in the application package. If your project is recommended for funding, IES will use this summary as the basis for the online abstract that is posted on the IES website. IES recommends that the project summary/abstract be two pages long and follow the format used for IES online abstracts. See the online search engine of funded research grants (<https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/awards>) for examples of the content to include in the project summary/abstract.

a) Title

- **Title:** Distinct, descriptive title for the project.

b) Project Summary

The purpose of the project summary is to provide a high-level overview that is accessible to a range of audiences, such as policymakers, practitioners, and the public. This section should use short, active sentences to briefly describe the breakthrough potential of the project, project activities, and the intended outcomes.

- **Purpose:** Include a brief description of the proposed education solution, the problem to be solved, why the solution has breakthrough potential, and the expected outcomes.
- **Project Activities:** An overview of the Phase One project activities.
- **Products:** A brief description of the expected early-stage prototype the project team will develop.

2. Bibliography and References Cited

You **must** submit the bibliography and references cited as a separate PDF attachment in the application package. There is no recommended page length for the bibliography and references cited. You should include complete citations, including the names of all authors (in the same sequence in which they appear in the publication), titles of relevant elements such as the article/journal and chapter/book, page numbers, and year of publication for literature cited in the project narrative. As a reminder, use the author-date style for citations in the project narrative (see [Part III.B.5](#)).

3. Human Subjects Narrative

If you are proposing to carry out any R&D with human subjects as part of your proposed Phase One activities, you **must** submit an exempt or non-exempt human subjects narrative as a separate PDF attachment in the application package. We do not recommend a page length for the human subjects narrative. See *Information About the Protection of Human Subjects in Research Supported by the Department of Education* (<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/manage-your-grant/protection-of-human-subjects-research/protection-of-human-subjects-human-subjects-research-narrative>) for a brief overview of principles, regulations, and policies which affect research involving human subjects in research activities supported by the Department of Education.

The U.S. Department of Education does not require certification of IRB approval at the time you submit an application. However, if an application that involves non-exempt human subjects research is recommended for funding, the designated U.S. Department of Education official will request that you obtain and send the certification within 30 days of the formal request.

4. Biographical Sketches for Key Personnel

You **must** submit a biographical sketch (an abbreviated CV) and current and pending support information for each person named as key personnel in the application. You may also submit biographical sketches for consultants (optional). Biographical sketches must be **no more than five pages**. There is **no recommended page length** for current and pending support.

Create one PDF file for each person's biographical sketch and current and pending support. Attach each person's PDF to the Research & Related Senior/Key Person Profile (Expanded) form in the application package. IES strongly encourages applicants to use SciENcv (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sciencv/>) where you will find IES Biographical Sketch and IES Current and Pending (Other) Support formats. After logging in to SciENcv, you will be able to select the IES formats after selecting the "Create a New Document" option. You may also develop your own formats. If you use SciENcv, the research security certification will be part of the IES format. If you use your own format, you will need to add this information.

The biographical sketch for the principal investigator, each co-principal investigator, other key personnel, and consultants (if included) should show how personnel possess training and expertise commensurate with their specified duties on the proposed project, for example by describing relevant publications, grants, training experience, and research experience, including experience working with the study population as applicable.

Provide a list of current and pending grants for the principal investigator and other key personnel, along with the proportion of their time, expressed as percent **effort over a 12-month calendar year**, allocated to each project. Include the proposed IES grant as one of the pending grants in this list.

While not required at the time of application, all key personnel must have a persistent identifier (PID), such as ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor Identification; <https://orcid.org/>) at the time of award. For all key personnel who have a PID at the time of application, include the PID in the biographical sketch and in the “Credential, e.g., agency login” field on the Research and Related Senior/Key Person Profile (Expanded) form in the application package. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for more information about this form in the application package.

If you or any key member of your project team does not yet have a PID, IES encourages you to establish one as soon as possible, given the requirement that all key personnel are required to have a PID in place before IES will make an award.

Part IV: Competition Regulations and Review Criteria

A. Funding Mechanisms and Restrictions

1. Mechanism of Support

IES intends to award grants pursuant to this Request for Applications.

2. Funding Available

All awards pursuant to this Request for Applications are contingent upon the availability of funds and the receipt of meritorious applications. IES makes its awards to the highest quality applications, as determined through scientific peer review.

For fiscal year (FY) 2027, IES intends to fund up to 12 C-STEP Phase One projects. IES may consider making additional awards to high-quality applications that remain unfunded after 12 awards are made should resources permit.

3. Special Considerations for Budget Expenses

a) Indirect Cost Rate

IES expects applicants to apply their institution's federally negotiated unrestricted indirect cost rate when developing a budget for the proposed research project. State agencies should apply their indirect cost rate negotiated with the U.S. Department of Education if they have one. If your institution does not have an indirect cost rate and you receive a grant from IES, the Indirect Cost Division (ICD) in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of the Chief Financial Officer (<https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/fo#indirect-cost-division>) can help with obtaining an indirect cost rate once the grant is awarded. Please note that the ICD is not available for assistance during the application preparation process.

Most institutions that do not have a current negotiated rate may use a de minimis rate of 15 percent of modified total direct costs (see 2 CFR §200.414 for more information, <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200/subpart-E/subject-group-ECFRd93f2a98b1f6455/section-200.414>). This de minimis rate may be used indefinitely and no documentation is required to justify its use.

Institutions, both primary grantees and subawardees, not located in the territorial United States may not charge indirect costs.

b) Meetings and Conferences

If you are requesting funds to cover expenses for hosting meetings or conferences, please note that there are statutory and regulatory requirements in determining whether costs are reasonable and necessary. Please refer to the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (Uniform Guidance), 2 CFR, §200.432 Conferences (<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200/subpart-E/subject-group-ECFRd1f39f9b3d4e72/section-200.432>).

Federal grant funds cannot be used to pay for alcoholic beverages or entertainment, which includes costs for amusement, diversion, and social activities. In general, federal funds may not be used to pay for food. A grantee hosting a meeting or conference may not use grant funds to pay for food for conference attendees unless doing so is necessary to accomplish legitimate meeting or conference business. You may request funds to cover expenses for working meetings, such as working lunches; however, IES will determine whether these costs are allowable in keeping with the Uniform Guidance Cost Principles. Grantees are responsible for the proper use of their grant awards and may have to repay funds to the

Department if they violate the rules for meeting- and conference-related expenses or other disallowed expenditures.

4. Program Authority

20 U.S.C. 9501 et seq.

5. Applicable Regulations

Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (Uniform Guidance) codified at CFR Part 200. The Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) in 34 CFR parts 77, 81, 82, 84, 86 (part 86 applies only to institutions of higher education), 97, 98, and 99. In addition 34 CFR part 75 is applicable, except for the provisions in 34 CFR 75.100, 75.101(b), 75.102, 75.103, 75.105, 75.109(a), 75.200, 75.201, 75.209, 75.210, 75.211, 75.217, 75.219, 75.220, 75.221, 75.222, and 75.230. Please note that under ESRA section 191, these regulations are applicable only to the extent this RFA does not establish more specific requirements. If the RFA sets a different requirement, that requirement will take precedence. This program is not subject to the intergovernmental review requirements of Executive Order 12372.

6. General Terms and Conditions

If you are awarded a grant under this competition, you must ensure and may be required to demonstrate that federal funds will not be used under this project in any manner that violates the United States Constitution, Title VI or Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 U.S.C. 2000d et seq. or 42 U.S.C. 2000e et seq.), Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. 1681 et seq.), section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. 794), the Age Discrimination Act of 1975 (42 U.S.C. 6101 et seq.), Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 12131 et seq.), the Boy Scouts of America Equal Access Act of 2001 (20 U.S.C. 7905), section 117 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (20 U.S.C. 1011f), or other applicable federal law. To the extent that any entity receiving grant funds under this grant uses those grant funds for such unallowable activities, IES reserves the right to take appropriate enforcement actions, including the recovery of grant funds or may pursue termination or non-continuation. The Grant Award Notification document accompanying your award may contain further terms and conditions, as necessary, to ensure grantee compliance with applicable laws, regulations, and administrative priorities.

7. Continuation Awards

In making a continuation award determination under 34 CFR 75.253, IES considers the following, among other things: whether a grantee has made substantial progress in achieving the goals and objectives of the project; whether the grantee has expended funds in a manner that is consistent with its approved application and budget; or whether the grant continues to be in the best interest in the federal government.

In making a continuation award determination, IES also considers whether the grantee is operating in compliance with the terms and conditions specified elsewhere in this notice and the assurances in its approved application, including those applicable to Federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination in programs or activities receiving Federal financial assistance from IES (34 CFR 100.4, 104.5, 106.4, 108.8, and 110.23). In making any continuation award determination, IES may consider all relevant information.

B. Additional Requirements

1. Pre-Award

a) Clarification and Budget Questions

IES uses the scientific peer review process as the first step in making funding decisions. If your application is recommended for funding based on the outcome of the scientific peer review, an IES program officer will contact you to clarify (1) any issues of concern to IES or the peer reviewers, (2) your plans for sharing final data, if applicable, and (2) the adequacy of the proposed budget to support the proposed scope of work within federal guidelines (see Uniform Guidance Cost Principles <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200/subpart-E>).

b) Compliance with Research Security Requirements

All recipients of IES research and research training funds are required to be in compliance with the research security requirements described below prior to receiving IES funding.

Research Security Assessment and Required Recipient Documentation

IES reserves the right to perform risk assessments, using analytical tools, of proposals and awards submitted to IES to assess nondisclosures of required information from senior/key personnel, and establish other policies and procedures for identifying, communicating, and addressing security risks that may threaten the integrity of IES-supported research and development.

IES applicants and recipients are required to maintain supporting documentation, including copies of contracts, grants, or any other agreements specific to foreign appointments, employment with a foreign institution, participation in a foreign talent recruitment program and other information reported as current and pending (other) support for all senior/key personnel that must be available to IES upon request. Applicants and recipients are expected to review requested supporting documentation for compliance with IES award terms and conditions.

Research Security Training

IES requires research security training certifications from applicants and individuals identified as senior/key personnel by the applicant. Applicants may utilize any training that addresses cybersecurity, international collaboration, foreign interference, and rules for proper use of funds, disclosure, conflict of commitment, and conflict of interest. The NSF-funded SECURE Center developed a condensed online research security training (RST) module (<https://www.secure-center.org/training>) designed to meet the government-wide RST requirement in Section 10634 of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (42 U.S.C. § 19234). To that end, IES recognizes completion of the condensed module as compliant with the RST requirements.

Research Security Training Requirement for Federal Award Personnel: In accordance with Section 10634 of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (42 U.S.C. § 19234), **each individual identified as a senior/key person must certify that they have completed the requisite research security training that meets the requirements specified above within 12 months prior to application submission.**

- *Certification Regarding Research Security Training for Federal Research Award Personnel:* In accordance with Section 10634 of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (42 U.S.C. § 19234), the Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) must certify that all individuals identified as senior/key personnel have completed the requisite research security training that meets the requirements specified above.
- *Certification Regarding Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research (RECR) (Applies to Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) Only):* The AOR is required to complete a certification

that the institution has a plan to provide appropriate training and oversight in the responsible and ethical conduct of research to undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, faculty, and other senior/key personnel who will be supported by IES to conduct research and that such training addresses mentor training and mentorship, training to raise awareness of potential research security threats, and Federal export control, disclosure, and reporting requirements.

Malign Foreign Talent Recruitment Program Prohibition (MFTRP)

IES requires MFTRP certifications from applicants and individuals identified as senior/key personnel.

Pre-Award Certifications:

- In accordance with Section 10632 of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (42 U.S.C. § 19232), the AOR must certify that all individuals identified as senior/key personnel have been made aware of and have complied with their responsibility under that section to certify that the individual is not a party to a malign foreign talent recruitment program.
- In accordance with Section 10632 of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (42 U.S.C. § 19232), each individual identified as a senior/key person must certify that they are not a party to a malign foreign talent recruitment program.

Post-award Certification: Individuals serving as a PI or co-PI on an active IES award made on or after October 1, 2027, must certify annually via their Annual Performance Report to their participation or non-participation in an MFTRP. Additional information regarding the annual certification process can be found at <https://www.nsf.gov/research-security>.

Certification Regarding IHEs Hosting or Supporting Confucius Institutes

In accordance with Section 10339A of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (42 U.S.C. § 19039), no IES funds may be awarded to an IHE that maintains a contract or agreement between the institution and a Confucius Institute. The IES Director, after consultation with the National Academies, may issue a waiver for an IHE that maintains such a contract or agreement between the institution and a Confucius Institute if such contract or agreement includes clear provisions that:

1. protect academic freedom at the institution;
2. prohibit the application of any foreign law on any campus of the institution;
3. grant full managerial authority of the Confucius Institute to the institution including full control over what is being taught, the activities carried out, the research awards that are made, and who is employed at the Confucius Institute; and
4. prohibit co-location with the institution's Chinese language, history, and cultural programs and require separate promotional materials.

Waiver: An IHE may submit a request for a waiver or a waiver renewal that includes a description of the Confucius Institute, including at a minimum how the contract or agreement provisions satisfy each of the four criteria above. Waiver requests must be sent to IES at IESDirector@ed.gov.

- IES encourages consideration of the following reports by the National Academies in preparing waiver requests: *Confucius Institutes at U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: Waiver Criteria for the Department of Defense and Foreign-Funded Language and Culture Institutes at U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: Practices to Assess and Mitigate Risk*. An IHE not granted a waiver will be provided a written explanation of the reason(s) for the denial.

Certification Regarding IHEs Hosting or Supporting Confucius Institutes: In compliance with Section 10339A of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 (42 U.S.C. § 19039), the AOR must certify that, absent a

waiver granted by the IES Director, the IHE does not maintain a contract or agreement between the institution and a Confucius Institute.

c) Assessment of Past Performance

IES considers the applicant's performance and use of funds under a previous federal award as part of the criteria for making a funding decision. IES also determines the PI's compliance with the IES Policy Regarding Public Access to Research if they were the PI on previous IES grants awarded in 2012 or later (<https://ies.ed.gov/funding/researchaccess.asp>).

d) Persistent Identifiers (PIDs) for Key Personnel

All key personnel are required to have a PID, such as ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor Identification; <https://orcid.org/>) in place before an award will be made.

e) Alignment with SEER 27

If your application is considered for funding, IES program officers will review the completeness and acceptability of the information in Appendix F: Alignment with SEER 27 prior to making the new award.

2. Post-Award

a) Compliance with IES Policy Regarding Public Access to Research

Public Access to Research

IES requires all grantees to submit the electronic version of peer-reviewed scholarly publications to ERIC (<https://eric.ed.gov/>), a publicly accessible and searchable electronic database of education research that makes available full-text documents to the public for free. This public access requirement (<https://ies.ed.gov/funding/researchaccess.asp>) applies to peer-reviewed, original scholarly publications that have been supported (in whole or in part) with direct funding from IES. The public access requirement does not apply to book chapters, editorials, reviews, or non-peer-reviewed conference proceedings. As the designated representative for the grantee organization, IES holds the PI responsible for ensuring that authors of publications stemming from the grant comply with this requirement.

The author's final manuscript is defined as the final version accepted for journal publication and includes all modifications from the peer review process. Submission of accepted manuscripts for public accessibility through ERIC must occur immediately upon acceptance for publication.

The ERIC website includes a homepage for the Grantee and Online Submission System (<https://eric.ed.gov/submit/>), as well as a Frequently Asked Questions page (<https://eric.ed.gov/?granteefaq>). During the submission process, authors will submit bibliographic information from the publication, including the Digital Object Identifier (DOI), title, authors' names and Persistent Digital Identifiers (PIDs such as ORCID), publication date, journal title, and International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), and associated IES award number(s).

b) Specific Conditions on Grants

IES may impose specific conditions on a grant pertinent to the proper implementation of key aspects of the proposed research design or to reaching data access goals, if the grantee is not financially stable, has a history of unsatisfactory performance, has an unsatisfactory financial or other management system, has not fulfilled the conditions of a prior grant, is not compliant with a statutory or regulatory requirement or a requirement of this RFA or is otherwise not responsible.

c) Attendance at the Annual IES PI Meeting

The PI is required to attend one meeting each year (for up to 3 days) in Washington, DC with other IES grantees and IES staff. The grant's budget should include this meeting. Should the PI not be able to attend the meeting, they may designate another person who is key personnel on the research team to attend.

d) Participation in ATS Hub Activities

The IES-funded ATS Hub supports the ATS initiative, including recipients of this grant program. IES expects the PI to participate in ATS Hub events to foster community building and knowledge exchange including monthly community calls, workshops, and two additional one day meetings in Washington, DC: a workshop led by the ATS Hub in late summer/early fall 2027 and demo day in early 2028. The PI may designate another person who is key personnel to attend ATS Hub events when the PI is unable to attend.

C. Overview of Application and Scientific Peer Review Process

1. Submitting Your Letter of Intent

Letters of intent are submitted online at the IES Peer Review Information Management Online (PRIMO) system (<https://iesreview.ed.gov/LOI/LOISubmit>). Select the letter of intent form for the grant program under which you plan to submit your application. The online submission form contains fields for each of the content areas listed below. Use these fields to provide the following information. The project description should be single-spaced and is recommended to be no more than one page (about 3,500 characters).

The letter of intent is non-binding and optional but strongly recommended. IES staff use the information in letters of intent to identify the expertise needed for the scientific peer review panels and to secure enough reviewers to handle the anticipated number of applications.

Elements of the letter of intent:

- Descriptive title for the proposed project
- Brief description of the proposed project
- Name, institutional affiliation, address, telephone number, and email address of the PI
- Name and institutional affiliation of any key collaborators
- Duration of the proposed project (attend to the duration maximum)
- Estimated total budget request (attend to the budget maximum)

2. Resubmissions and Multiple Submissions

a) Resubmissions

There are no resubmissions for this program in FY2027.

b) Multiple Submissions

You may submit applications to more than one of the FY 2027 research grant programs offered through the U.S. Department of Education (ED), including those offered through IES as well as those offered through other offices and programs within ED. You may submit multiple applications to this grant program as long as they propose different solutions. However, you may submit a given application only once for the IES FY 2027 grant competitions, meaning you may not submit the same application or similar applications to multiple grant programs within IES, to multiple topics within a grant competition, or multiple times within the same topic. If you submit multiple similar applications, IES will determine whether and which applications will be accepted for review and/or will be eligible for funding.

If you submit the same or similar application to IES and to another funding entity within or external to the Department of Education and receive funding for the non-IES application prior to IES scientific peer review of applications, you must withdraw the same or similar application submitted to IES, or IES may otherwise determine you are ineligible to receive an award. If reviews are happening concurrently, IES staff will consult with the other potential funder to determine the degree of overlap and which entity will provide funding if both applications are being considered for funding.

If you submit the same or similar application to IES and to another funding entity as described above, indicate this on the Application for Federal Assistance SF 424 (R&R) form in the application package in the “Submission to Other Agencies” field by checking “Yes” and including the name of the other agency or agencies. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for more information about this form.

3. Application Processing

Applications must be submitted electronically and received no later than 11:59:59 p.m. Eastern Time on December 11, 2026 using the Grants.gov Workspace (<https://www.grants.gov/applicants/workspace-overview.html>). You must follow the application procedures and submission requirements described in the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) and on Grants.gov (<https://www.grants.gov/applicants/>).

After applications are fully uploaded and validated at Grants.gov, the U.S. Department of Education receives the applications for processing and transfer to the IES PRIMO system (<https://iesreview.ed.gov/>). PRIMO allows applicants to track the progress of their application via the Applicant Notification System (ANS).

Approximately one to two weeks after the application deadline, invitation emails are sent to applicants who have never applied to IES before to create their individual PRIMO ANS accounts. Both the PI and the AOR will receive invitation emails. Approximately four to six weeks after the application deadline, all applicants (new and existing ANS users) will begin to receive a series of emails about the status of their application. See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for additional information about ANS and PRIMO.

Once an application has been submitted and the application deadline has passed, you may not submit additional materials or information for inclusion with your application.

4. Scientific Peer Review Process

IES will forward all applications that are compliant and responsive to this RFA to be evaluated for breakthrough potential and scientific merit. Scientific reviews are conducted in accordance with the review criteria stated below and the review procedures posted on the IES website (<https://ies.ed.gov/what-we-do/peer-review#peer-review-of-ies-research-grant-applications>) by a panel of experts who have substantive and methodological expertise appropriate to the program of research and RFA.

At least two primary reviewers will complete written evaluations of the application, identifying strengths and weaknesses related to each of the review criteria. Primary reviewers will independently assign a score for each criterion, as well as an overall score, for each application they review. Based on the overall scores assigned by primary reviewers, IES calculates an average overall score for each application and prepares a preliminary rank order of applications before the full peer review panel convenes to complete the review of applications.

The full panel will consider and score only those applications deemed to be the most competitive and to have the highest merit, as reflected by the preliminary rank order. A panel member may nominate for consideration by the full panel any application that they believe merits full panel review but that would not have been included in the full panel meeting based on its preliminary rank order.

5. Review Criteria for Scientific Merit

IES expects reviewers to assess the breakthrough potential and scientific merit of the project proposed to judge the likelihood that it will make a meaningful contribution to the larger IES mission. Information about each of these criteria is described in [Part II.B](#).

a) Breakthrough Potential

- Does the applicant identify a compelling problem that, if solved, will transform education and policy leaders' ability to rapidly and coherently incorporate evidence with the greatest potential to address intractable problems in their education system and dramatically improve education outcomes of their students?
- Does the applicant provide a clear and compelling theory for how the proposed solution will solve the identified problem? Does this theory reflect knowledge of relevant research and practice?
- Does the applicant make a compelling case for how this project represents a potential breakthrough to solving the problem? Does it describe the current barriers in the system and how the proposed solution will overcome those?
- Does the applicant identify open questions or key assumptions that, if addressed, would increase confidence in the ability of this solution to improve education outcomes at scale? Are they missing key assumptions that are critical to address in Phase One?
- Does the applicant demonstrate understanding of relevant education systems and settings and how their proposed solution could be adopted and implemented?
- Does the applicant provide a plausible mechanism to scale the solution?

b) Research and Development Strategy

- Does the applicant propose a detailed and appropriate set of project activities to address the questions that need to be answered in Phase One?
- Is the proposed set of project activities likely to result in a high-quality proof-of-concept report, R&D plan, and early-stage prototype of the solution?
- Does the applicant provide a compelling plan for addressing open questions about the feasibility, market fit, and scalability of their solution?

c) Team Capacity

- Do the personnel on the team have experience relevant to user and market research and education solution design?
- Do the personnel on the team have experience with AI and technological solutions to complex systems level problems?
- Does the project team have sufficient time allocated to complete the proposed activities?

6. Award Decisions

The following will be considered in making award decisions for responsive and compliant applications:

- Alignment with SEER 27
- Scientific merit as determined by scientific peer review.

- Contribution to the overall program of R&D described in this RFA.
- Compliance with research security requirements
- Performance and use of funds under a previous federal award.
- Ability to carry out the proposed R&D within the maximum award and duration requirements.
- Compliance with the IES Public Access Policy on previous IES awards.
- PIDs for all key personnel.
- Availability of funds.

Part V: Compliance and Responsiveness Checklist

Only compliant and responsive applications will be forwarded for scientific peer review. Use this checklist to better ensure you have included all required components for compliance and that you have addressed all project narrative requirements for responsiveness. This checklist does not include project narrative recommendations, which are IES's expectations of high-quality projects and which reviewers use, in conjunction with their professional judgment and expertise, to evaluate applications. See [Part II.B.2](#) for project narrative recommendations.

See the IES Application Submission Guide (<https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>) for an application checklist that describes the forms in the application package that must be completed and the PDF files that must be attached to the forms for a successful submission through Grants.gov.

Compliance	
Have you included the project narrative?	
Do the project narrative and other narrative content adhere to all formatting requirements?	
Do the project narrative and other narrative content adhere to all page maximums as described in the RFA? IES will remove any pages above the maximum before forwarding an application for scientific peer review.	
Have you included the required Appendix F ?	
General Requirements for Responsiveness	
Does the application conform to the award limits?	
Is your proposed solution relevant to education in the U.S. and does it address issues under the control of U.S. education systems?	
C-STEP Phase One Project Narrative Requirements for Responsiveness	
Does your project narrative include the three required sections? Did you describe the elements required for each section as listed below?	
Breakthrough Potential	• The student education outcome(s) your solution is intended to improve. • Your proposed solution. • The PreK-12 education setting and sample that is the focus of your project.
Research and Development Strategy	• Your team's approach to carrying out the Phase One scope of work.
Team Capacity	• Your team.

Part VI: Program Code

Applications to the **From Seedlings to Scale Grants Program (ALN 84.305J)** are submitted under a single topic, *C-STEP — Coordinating Systems to Translate Evidence into Policy and Practice*.

You **must** enter the code below in Item 4b of the SF 424 Application for Federal Assistance form (see the IES Application Submission Guide, <https://ies.ed.gov/application-submission-guide>, for more information about this form).

S2S Program Topic	Code
<i>C-STEP</i> Phase One	NCER - <i>C-STEP</i>