September 21, 2009

Dear Community Member:

Prior to the release of a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Adolescent Literacy Program, the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) has developed a Concept Paper that presents the agency's approach to this critical field. The Concept Paper addresses strategies to improve reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills of adolescents in grades 6-8 through programming offered during out-of-school time. We invite your review and comment.

DYCD's adolescent literacy initiative is now entering its fourth year and evaluation results have demonstrated significant increases in reading outcomes in the majority of the funded programs. As detailed in the Concept Paper, through the upcoming RFP DYCD will seek providers able to offer innovative, yet proven, services that will build on this success. Through a new competition, DYCD will contract with an Adolescent Literacy Support provider to assist service providers and ensure continuous program quality improvement.

Constructive feedback will be an essential feature of the planning process as we develop and finalize the upcoming Adolescent Literacy Program RFP. I thank you for your careful consideration of this Concept Paper and look forward to your comments.

Please email your comments to conceptpaper@dycd.nyc.gov (enter "adolescent literacy" in the subject line of the email). If you prefer, you may mail written comments to the attention of:

>   Nancy Russell
>   Department of Youth and Community Development
>   156 William Street, 2nd Floor
>   New York, NY 10038

Please note that we are only able to consider written comments received no later than 5:00 p.m. on October 19, 2009.

The Adolescent Literacy Program Concept Paper is attached and will be posted on our website at www.nyc.gov/dycd. I urge you to distribute this Concept Paper to all who are interested in literacy services for adolescents and to share with us your best thoughts regarding this solicitation.

Sincerely,

Jeanne B. Mullgrav

Department of Youth & Community Development

Jeanne B. Mullgrav
Commissioner

Adolescent Literacy Program Concept Paper

Purpose of the RFP

The National Institute for Literacy supports the definition of literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society."[1] In an increasingly complex, knowledge-based society, such skills have become ever more important to enable a person to compete in the global economy and pursue learning throughout life.

In recent years, substantial resources have been directed toward improving the literacy skills of young children and have yielded significant results. However, while fourth grade reading scores have risen for several years, eighth and twelfth grade scores have remained flat since the 1970s.[2] Only 29 percent of public school eighth graders in the United States meet the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standard of reading proficiency, and only 2 percent read at an advanced level. Among low-income eighth graders just 15 percent read at or above a proficient level.[3] Non-native English speakers face the double challenge of learning English and improving literacy skills.

In New York City (City), students have made impressive gains since 2002 when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg assumed control of the schools and launched a concerted effort to improve scores and graduation rates. In 2009, 68.9 percent of fourth graders and 57 percent of eighth graders met or exceeded standards as tested by the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) exam, up from 46.5 percent and 29.5 percent, respectively, in 2002. And while City students continue to achieve at a lower rate than students in the rest of New York State (State), the gap has consistently narrowed. In 2002 City fourth graders scored 23.5 points below students in the rest of the state; in 2009 they scored 12.3 points below. City eighth graders scored 22.5 points below in 2002 and 17.5 points below in 2009.

To sustain the gains achieved, literacy support must be accessible to older students. The City Department of Education recently launched "Campaign for Middle School Success," a collaborative effort to raise academic standards and improve the quality of instruction in middle schools. Middle and high school students face increasing academic challenges. They need to go beyond decoding texts to gathering information from them and analyzing and interpreting what they read. They need to be able to write texts of their own and to discuss and defend their ideas. To succeed in high school, in college, and in the workplace they must develop advanced reading comprehension, writing, and other communication skills.[4]

Literacy services are clearly needed at all age levels, for both native and non-native English speakers. Research on the literacy development of adolescents demonstrates that low-performing

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[1]National Institute for Literacy website, http://nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html.
[2]Alliance for Excellent Education, "Why the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy Demands a National Response," *Policy Brief*, June 2006, www.all4ed.org.
[3]Alliance for Excellent Education, "Adolescent Literacy," Fact Sheet, February 2009, www.all 4ed.org.
[4]Alliance for Excellent Education, "Why the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy Demands a National Response," *Policy Brief*, June 2006, www.all4ed.org.

adolescents can significantly improve their literacy skills with intensive, comprehensive instruction.[5] DYCD's adolescent literacy initiative, now in its third year, has begun to yield positive results. A DYCD evaluation conducted in Year 2 of the program found significant increases in reading outcomes in 8 of 11 programs. Programs used diverse strategies ranging from more traditional direct instructional techniques to embedding literacy instruction within contexts such as technology, study of the urban environment, and theater. Incorporating literacy into project-based clubs, such as robotics and Latin dance, helped some programs maintain participant engagement. Programs also benefited from a strong connection between the school-day and after-school programs, including employment of school-day teachers in the after-school program in some capacity.

 DYCD will again separately contract for literacy programs that specifically address the needs of younger adolescents in grades 6-8. Programs would employ multiple strategies to improve not only reading, but also writing, listening, and speaking skills. Instructional strategies would promote motivation and engagement in reading and writing. Strategies would also address decoding skills, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

In addition to proposals for complete and separate adolescent literacy programs, DYCD would accept proposals to add literacy components to existing programs. Programs would be school-based or center-based.

DYCD will also award one contract to provide support to the Adolescent Literacy Program. The Adolescent Literacy Support provider would work closely with each adolescent literacy provider to implement strategies to continuously improve the program. It would observe program activities, interpret data on student progress, and provide and coordinate staff development activities in order to assist programs to revise their practices to achieve better student outcomes.

Competition Pools and Funding Levels

There will be two program options:

> Option I – Adolescent Literacy Services
> Option II – Adolescent Literacy Support

Option I will comprise five competitions, one in each borough. There will be one competition for Option II.

Proposers may propose to provide one or both of the program options and, for Option I, may propose programs in more than one borough. However, a separate and complete proposal must be submitted for each program option and for each borough proposed. In the event that a proposer is eligible for award of more than one program option or for award in more than one borough, DYCD reserves the right to determine, based on the proposer's demonstrated capability and best interests of the City, respectively, how many and for which program option(s) and, for Option II, in which borough(s) the proposer will be awarded contracts.

Annual funding for the Adolescent Literacy Program will total $1.0 million. Annual funding for Option I, Adolescent Literacy Services, will total $870,000. Borough allocations for Option I are based on each borough's proportionate share of sixth grade public school students and will be as follows: Manhattan: $114,125; Bronx: $187,155; Brooklyn: $251,485; Queens: $237,235; and Staten Island: $80,000.[6] DYCD anticipates awarding 7-10 contracts that would aggregately serve 175-225 adolescents at a cost ranging from $4,000 up to a maximum of $5,000 per participant.

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[5]Alliance for Excellent Education, "Adolescent Literacy: Opening the Doors to Success," Issue Brief, January 2005, www.all4ed.org.
[6]The allocation was adjusted to allow for funding of one program in Staten Island.

Annual funding for Option II, Adolescent Literacy Support, will total $130,000. DYCD anticipates awarding one contract.

Option I: Adolescent Literacy Services

Target Population

Adolescent Literacy Services programs will be intended for youth in grades 6-8 who are reading below grade level. Programs would focus specifically on those students who were assessed at Level 2 (below standards) on the City or State ELA exams in 2009. In order to facilitate multi-year enrollments, programs would particularly recruit sixth and seventh graders.

Program Elements

The proposed program model for the Adolescent Literacy Services program would be a balanced literacy approach which fosters literacy by incorporating literacy strategies within activities and spheres of interest that adolescents find engaging. Areas such as drama, art, recreation, health and relationships, music, journalism, or career exploration would provide a context for building vocabulary, improving reading comprehension, or enhancing writing skills. Practitioners would develop a curriculum that would imbed explicit literacy instruction within the chosen context. Programs would include the following elements:[7]

- A minimum of five hours per week, during out-of-school hours, of balanced literacy instruction using a one-on-one tutoring or small group format, with a maximum instructor to student ratio of one to five. The goal is for students to exit the program with the transferable literacy skills needed to successfully navigate content area material. Therefore, the program must integrate the teaching of specific skills into a broader context of reading and writing. Literacy instruction may include the following:

    - Strategies that increase phonemic awareness, reading compre- hension, and writing skills.
    - Strategies tailored to the needs of English-Language Learners such as more intensive vocabulary instruction and collaborative learning (*e.g.*, pairs, small groups).
    - Opportunities for self-directed learning as a means to strengthening participants' motivation to read, develop the habit of reading and writing, and build identities as readers.
    - Text-based collaborative learning, which involves students interacting with one another around texts that vary in terms of content, format, style, and levels of difficulty.
    - Computer-assisted instruction as a tool to facilitate reading comprehension and create opportunities for collaborative work and social interaction.

- A schedule of at least three days per week; weekend days may be included. Sessions would not exceed two hours.

- A climate of respect and high expectations.

- An environment for literacy that differs from the school environment, while building on in-school experience, and provides a wide range of formal and informal learning settings, such as book discussions, story dramatization, vocabulary-building activities, creative writing, journal writing, collaborative writing, reading and writing to conduct research.

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[7]See also, Gina Biancarosa and Catherine E. Snow, "Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report from Carnegie Corporation of New York," Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004, pp. 12-22.

- Initial and periodic assessment to evaluate student progress. DYCD will require a common instrument to be used by all programs to assess participants. Depending on the choice of instrument, it may also serve as the diagnostic tool.

- Development of an individualized educational plan for each participant.

- Collaboration with students' schools. The school leadership must be included in the program design and play a key role identifying potential program participants, involving teachers and parents, and otherwise supporting the program. A host school would be required to provide appropriate space, access to school resources, and afternoon snacks. Each school that participants attend would be required to provide OSIS numbers, ELA scores, and attendance records and sign a school linkage agreement.

- Opportunities for parent involvement in planning program activities and assessing student progress.

- Transition strategies to assist students as they move on to high school and face more intensive, varied, and complex reading and writing demands and increased homework.

Experience

The contractor and key staff would have at least three years of successful experience in the last five years providing adolescent literacy services.

Staffing and Staff Development

The contractor would create full-time positions wherever possible and appropriate in order to encourage program continuity and quality instruction and to provide staff access to benefits such as paid leave and health insurance.

The staff would include certified middle-school teachers or literacy coaches with master's degrees in reading to provide instruction and supervise instruction by tutors. Program administrators would be knowledgeable in successful literacy practices and would have experience administering similar literacy programming. Tutors, whether paid or volunteer, must have a background in providing literacy instruction and would receive pre-service training and in-service support. An on-site youth counselor is recommended.

Programs would incorporate high-quality ongoing professional development to insure that instructors are familiar with strategies that have been proven effective in teaching literacy to adolescents and maximizing motivation and engagement. The minimum requirement for instructional and counseling staff would be twelve hours of staff development activities during the academic year.

In addition, program staff would hold regular meetings to review progress, exchange information, and share instructional strategies. Program directors would also be expected to attend periodic meetings sponsored by DYCD to share best practices and address issues that may arise in the course of delivering literacy programming.

Support Services

The contractor would provide the appropriate setting and support services and work collaboratively with schools, businesses, and community organizations to insure that participants have access to comprehensive services and a continuum of instruction to meet their educational, personal, and career goals.

Cultural Sensitivity

All program staff, including volunteers, must provide services in a manner sensitive to the characteristics of the target population. Materials and curricula should reflect the lives, experiences, and interests of the participants.

Program Outcomes

The contractor would track and report progress toward outcomes to DYCD. Outcomes would be related to educational gains, improved motivation and engagement in reading and writing, improved school attendance, and retention in the program. The goal of the program is for students to be reading at grade level by the time of program completion.

Evaluation

Programs would be required to participate in an evaluation of the Adolescent Literacy Program conducted either by DYCD or an outside evaluator. A common assessment instrument or instruments will be used to measure participant achievement in all programs. **DYCD invites respondents to recommend an assessment instrument for measuring participant achievement.**

Option II: Adolescent Literacy Support

Program Elements

The Adolescent Literacy Support provider would support the cycle of program quality improvement[8] in each program by assisting the program providers to monitor progress and collect data, analyze and interpret that data, and revise practice based on the analysis.[9] It would work collaboratively with the program providers to:

- Implement the program elements and requirements
- Share best practices and support instruction
- Gather and incorporate participant input on program activities
- Provide professional development training to staff
- Achieve high attendance rates

The Adolescent Literacy Support provider would also:

- Conduct regular activity observations followed, as needed, by coaching, co-teaching, and revision of lesson plans to improve instruction and student outcomes
- Plan, review, and work with program staff to modify curriculum as needed

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[8]For a general introduction to quality improvement in the field of youth development, see A.Wilson-Ahlstrom, N.Yohalem, and K. Pittman, *Building Quality Improvement Systems: Lessons from Three Emerging Efforts in the Youth-Serving* Sector, http://www.forumfyi.org/qc/resources, Forum for Youth Investment, March 2007. For a recent example of this approach applied to an after-school literacy program, see J. Sheldon and L. Hopkins, *Supporting Success: Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs*, http://www.ppv.org/ppv/youth/youth_initiatives.asp ?section _id=8, Public/Private Ventures, February 2008.
[9]These elements of the quality improvement cycle are common and noted in a variety of educational program development and management approaches in addition to "continuous quality improvement" such as professional learning communities, facilitative administration, and data-driven decision making. See Richard DuFour, "What Is a Professional Learning Community?," *Educational Leadership*, May 2004; Tawana Brandy, et al., "How Program Administrators Can Support Out-of-school Time Staff," *ChildTrends Brief* #2009-32, June 2009; and Ashleigh Collins, et al., "Data-Driven Decision Making in Out-of-School Time Programs," *ChildTrends Brief* #2009-34, June 2009.

- Hold regular debriefing meetings with program staff on activities observed and emerging programmatic and organizational issues
- Work with linked school(s), where appropriate, and program staff to deliver staff training as needed, which would be counted toward the twelve-hour staff development requirement
- Conduct transfer training sessions for supervisory staff on how to carry out their own observations and provide training to staff
- Develop intermediate benchmarks of student progress and effectiveness and quality of instruction
- Introduce common evaluation tools
- Convene regular assessment meetings with the program director

Qualifications

Support activities would be conducted by adolescent literacy specialists with extensive knowledge of the foundation skills that adolescents need and extensive experience integrating them into an after-school setting that does not replicate school-day instruction and engages the participants. Specific qualifications for key staff are as follows:

- The project director would have a master's degree in literacy.
- At least three years' of recent experience providing literacy instruction to adolescents
- At least three years of recent experience in providing technical assistance and professional staff development to teachers
- New York State teacher certification preferred

Planned Method of Evaluating Proposals

Proposals will be evaluated pursuant to the evaluation criteria set forth in the RFP, which will include: quality and quantity of successful relevant experience, demonstrated level of organizational capability, and quality of proposed program approach.

Procurement Timeline/Contract Term

It is anticipated that DYCD will release an RFP for this procurement by Fall 2009. The proposal submission deadline will be approximately one month from the release of the RFP.

DYCD anticipates entering into three-year contracts for programs to begin July 1, 2010.

Comments

Please provide comments by email to conceptpaper@dycd.nyc.gov no later than October 19, 2009. Please indicate "adolescent literacy" in the subject line. Comments may also be mailed to:
Nancy Russell
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156 William Street, 2nd Floor
New York, New York 10038