

## **NOTICE TO ALL APPLICANTS: EQUITY FOR STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, AND OTHER PROGRAM BENEFICIARIES**

Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) ([20 U.S.C. 1228a](#)) applies to applicants for grant awards under this program.

**ALL APPLICANTS FOR NEW GRANT AWARDS MUST INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IN THEIR APPLICATIONS TO ADDRESS THIS PROVISION IN ORDER TO RECEIVE FUNDING UNDER THIS PROGRAM.**

Please respond to the following requests for information:

1. Describe how your entity's existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.

The Montana OPI recognizes the importance of equitable access to, and participation in, federally assisted programs for students, teachers, and their beneficiaries with special needs. As a component of applying and accepting federal funds, the OPI assures nondiscrimination based upon a free appropriate public education is available to all children with disabilities residing in the State between the ages of 3 and 21. These assurances relate specifically to IDEA Part B funding and to the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA).

2. Based on your proposed project or activity, what barriers may impede equitable access and participation of students, educators, or other beneficiaries?

Montana is a geographically rural state. Rural educational communities in Montana face severe challenges in contracting fully licensed and certified special education and related service providers. Factors in rural communities that impact contracting of educators and related service providers include but are not limited to lack of housing options, lower pay, lack of family childcare services, and minimal employment opportunities for family units.

3. Based on the barriers identified, what steps will you take to address such barriers to equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity?

The Montana OPI does have active and ongoing methodology for addressing the barrier of quality educator shortage, particularly in rural communities. The OPI annually produces a Critical Quality Educator Shortages Report. This report provides identification of schools and licensure endorsement areas impacted by the critical quality educator shortages. Newly hired quality educators who teach or work in a subject that has been identified as a "critical quality educator shortage area" at an "impacted school" are eligible to receive state paid loan assistance for up to four years, so long as they remain a full-time employee at an impacted school. The state has also developed stipend programs through the University of Montana Department of Psychology, and the Health School of Speech, Language, Hearing, and Occupational Sciences. The purpose of the stipend programs are to address critical shortages in School Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, and Speech Language Pathologists. In 2021, the Montana legislators created the Montana TEACH Act. The TEACH Act allows schools that have been experiencing difficulty recruiting educators, particularly Montana's rural schools, to increase starting teacher pay.

The Montana OPI has also worked in partnership with the MSU-Billings Special Education Endorsement Program. The Special Education Endorsement Project is a way to help school districts fill vacant special education teacher positions. Participants of the program receive tuition assistance to complete a master's degree to become endorsed in Special Education.

During the 2022-2023 school year, the OPI launched the Montana Teacher Residency Demonstration Project. Residents during the first year included special education candidates. Through the residency program, undergraduates participate in coursework while completing a yearlong apprenticeship in a classroom with a teacher leader. In exchange for committing to teach in a high-needs rural Montana school district for two years after completing the residency, residents receive a monthly stipend, partial tuition support, and district-provided housing.

Additionally, the OPI maintains a Jobs for Teachers website that allows schools to post jobs and search for candidates. Over the last two school years, the OPI has hosted five virtual teacher job fairs. The also OPI works with School Administrators of Montana (SAM) on recruitment of hard-to-find positions. Schools are encouraged to post positions with the Montana Schools Recruitment Project to assist with recruiting special education and related services personnel.

Finally, Montana is supporting access to mental health through grant opportunities. Montana currently has the USED grant for Mental Health Pathways for rural and tribal communities. The OPI and the MT Healthcare Foundation have a joint project focusing on school-based health clinics that provide mental health supports to students. Montana also has the SAMHSA Project AWARE Grant that offers scholarships and loan forgiveness for graduates that agree to work in Montana schools. This project began in the Summer of 2021.

4. What is your timeline, including targeted milestones, for addressing these identified barriers?

The Montana OPI will continue to work on assisting school districts to address critical teacher shortages in Special Education, especially rural communities. The timeline for removal of the identified barriers is as soon as possible. A major consideration of the OPI is the hiring processes and systems in place that the local school districts implement. Montana school districts are continuously seeking to fill open positions with the support of the OPI. The OPI does make allowances for hiring in the specific following areas: Employment of retired teachers; Class 5 Provisional Certificate; SPED Endorsement Program; and the Montana Residency Program. Montana will continue to implement programs addressing the critical educator shortage on continual basis. Targeted milestones will include reducing teacher shortages and related services shortages annually in the areas of certified Special Education Teachers, Paraprofessionals, and related service providers in SPL, OT, PT, and Deaf & Blind services.

**Notes:**

1. Applicants are not required to have mission statements or policies that align with equity in order to submit an application.
2. Applicants may identify any barriers that may impede equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity, including, but not limited to, barriers based on economic disadvantage, gender, race, ethnicity, color, national origin, disability, age, language, migrant status, rural status, homeless status or housing insecurity, pregnancy, parenting, or caregiving status, and sexual orientation.

3. Applicants may have already included some or all of this required information in the narrative sections of their applications or their State Plans. In responding to this requirement, for each question, applicants may provide a cross-reference to the section(s) and page number(s) in their applications or State Plans that includes the information responsive to that question on this form or may restate that information on this form.

**Paperwork Burden Statement**

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, no persons are required to respond to a collection of information unless such collection displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 1894-0005. Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 3 hours per response, including time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering, and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. The obligation to respond to this collection is required to obtain or retain a benefit. If you have any comments concerning the accuracy of the time estimate or suggestions for improving this individual collection, send your comments to [ICDocketMgr@ed.gov](mailto:ICDocketMgr@ed.gov) and reference OMB Control Number 1894-0005. All other comments or concerns regarding the status of your individual form may be addressed to either (a) the person listed in the FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT section in the competition Notice Inviting Applications, or (b) your assigned program officer.