Request for Qualifications – LENS-NC

Learning for Equity: A Network for Solutions – North Carolina, LENS-NC, is an action and learning network of nine diverse organizations from across North Carolina led by MDC and supported by Oak Foundation. Network members are exploring ways to create positive changes in the outcomes for students with learning differences who are affected by educational inequities due to racism and/or poverty.

Children with learning differences are three times as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to be jobless, and twice as likely to receive out-of-school suspensions.¹ These numbers are even worse when the students with learning differences are low-income students and/or students of color. Students of color with learning differences are also more likely to be placed in special education classrooms with less rigorous curriculums and fewer opportunities to transition to postsecondary education. Researchers and advocates argue that disability status for these students has become a tool to perpetuate racial segregation, especially in the South.² The organizations in the LENS-NC Network are looking to create strategies to divert these children from the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline and create spaces for them to thrive.

The Network provides opportunities for organizations to learn together, learn from one another, address common challenges, and explore opportunities to amplify effective strategies for change at classroom, school, community, district, and state levels. MDC would like to see multi-directional learning between organizations, projects, and the larger community of network organizations. To extend its reach in North Carolina, the Oak Foundation Learning Differences Programme (LDP) selected MDC, a nonprofit based in Durham, North Carolina, to serve as a philanthropic intermediary for the Foundation. MDC recruits and selects Network participants, facilitates and shapes the Network, leads participant communications, and manages Network organization funding. MDC works closely with the Foundation to share progress and get input and expertise from LDP staff.

MDC seeks an experienced evaluator for a three-year effort to evaluate the following aspects of the Network.

- The extent to which MDC is achieving a set of identified success measures for participating Network organizations and the Network itself.
- The extent to which MDC is achieving its own success measures.
- The factors that support that success: which organizational practices and Network activities contribute to success and why?

In addition, MDC would like assistance from an evaluator to structure an approach for supporting Network member organizations to gauge the outputs and outcomes of their participation in the Network.

About LENS-NC

Nine North Carolina organizations currently participate in LENS-NC; the Network will soon expand to include another ten or eleven organizations; participants are from organizations that center their work on education, access to services, disability rights, and parent organizing. They were and will be selected to learn more about the intersection of race, educational equity, and learning differences through participation in LENS-NC. Current participants are the Center for Racial Equity in Education (Charlotte); Disability Rights North Carolina (Raleigh); Education Justice Alliance (Raleigh); El Futuro (Durham); Exceptional Children’s Assistance Center (Davidson); Immersion for Spanish Language Acquisition (Chapel Hill); Rural Opportunity Institute (Tarboro); and Student U (Durham).

Members of the Network share new and promising ways to ensure that children with learning differences and their families receive the supports they need. They address common challenges and explore opportunities to amplify effective strategies for change through knowledge gained from the work, from perspectives they gain from their LENS-NC supported projects, and through participating in the Network.

Network activities are and will continue to be curated and created to develop relationships across member interests, expertise, and region. These activities will be designed with Network success measures in mind and will include:

- Convenings and webinars
- Network mapping
- Creating and executing learning plans
- Engaging in peer learning activities
- Inter-organization collaboration
- Community engagement and education

Network success measures include:

- Network members will create a narrative about organizational work and/or their project and how that fits into the larger educational practice or policy landscape. This might include a focus on common barriers for students with learning differences, specific barriers for students with learning differences at different intersections, and the current research or practices for students with learning differences at the intersection of race and income.
- Network members will be able to define and share their knowledge and best practices for students, teachers, parents, and other community members with stakeholders around the state.
- Network organizations will be able to articulate the policy changes they would like to see and identify how those changes will positively impact the population(s) they serve.
- Network members will be able to create and execute plans that address challenges and opportunities faced by the population(s) they serve and create plans that advocate for policy changes at the classroom, school, district, and/or state levels.

MDC success measures include:
• MDC staff will be able to articulate and identify common Network goals and individual member goals.
• MDC staff will understand the current education policies that impact academic and social outcomes for BIPOC and/or low-income students with learning differences in North Carolina. They will also be able to identify strategies that can be used or are being used by the Network and organizations within the Network to improve outcomes for students.
• MDC staff will create a plan that would allow them to export this network-building process to other states in the South.

Member organizations have learned about the programs and projects underway in participating LENS-NC organizations. Preliminary results from the first LENS-NC cohort show mutually beneficial partnering activities and the sharing of knowledge resources, new ideas, data, and strategies. For more information on LENS-NC, go to MDC’s website.

Scope of Work

This is a three-year engagement, beginning in April of 2022. We expect that the first task for the selected firm is to learn about LENS-NC and our interests and shape a detailed scope of work and corresponding work plan for this evaluation project.

The project components that we envision are:
• Development of initiative logic model based on MDC’s working set of success measures. We envision that this process will help us refine or clarify success measures for MDC and Network members.
• Shape an approach for evaluating whether and to what extent Network activities contribute to or are responsible for achieving Network success measures. We are particularly interested in identifying our Network Mapping process’s role in Network outcomes. Given the overall contract budget, we expect that the selected firm will work with MDC to establish data collection tools that help us gauge the relationship between activities and desired outcomes and equip MDC to carry out data collection that the evaluator can work with us to analyze at periodic junctures.

In addition to refining the scope of work and shaping a work plan, we expect that the first six months of the project will include working with the MDC and Oak Foundation LDP staff to refine our thinking about success measures and shape the logic model. In addition, we expect the consultant to review our current approach to Network Mapping, which is carried out through Kumu and Sumapp, and, based on our desired outcomes, to make suggestions on how we use the Network Mapping process.

We expect that the consultant will work with MDC to set a series of approaches or tools that MDC can use to gauge progress towards desired outcomes (success measures) and will meet with the MDC team at regular intervals (likely quarterly) to review data and to refine the data collection approach based on MDC and Network member experience. The consultant may also be best positioned to gather certain information from Network members and set a strategy for such data gathering.
The consultant will be responsible for a final report to MDC that draws upon data gathered by their firm and by MDC staff and that answers the questions articulated above:

1. To what extent have MDC and Network members achieved the desired outcomes (success measures) for LENS-NC?
2. To what extent has MDC achieved its success measures?
3. Which MDC organizational practices and Network activities contribute to success and why?

This work is iterative and given the changing needs of how organizations and individuals can safely interact, we expect that the Network activities may be adjusted over time. An evaluation team that is passionate about the principles of educational equity and is ready to consider adjustments for iterative work that can accommodate changing practices that benefit organizations and individuals will be a good fit for this role.

Budget

MDC funds the scope of work. The total budget is $90,000 over three years, with an estimated allocation of $40,000 in Year 1, $30,000 in Year 2, and $20,000 in Year 3.

A firm’s fees, as well as any design services, will be included in this budget. Work is expected to begin in May 2022 and end in July 2024, and the evaluation proposed budget should not exceed $90,000.

Proposals with accompanying budget and narrative should describe what the respondent believes are key priorities for the remainder of this fiscal year (through June 2022) and the cost for that work, as well as proposed activities and expenses for fiscal years 2022-23 and 2023-2024.

Qualifications

Required

- Alignment of organizational values with MDC and the LENS-NC initiative that centers educational equity and racial equity; you can find more about MDC values here
- An understanding of the research and data regarding the inequities at the intersection of race, education, poverty, and learning differences
- Demonstrated experience working with ambitious efforts to improve educational outcomes
- Demonstrated experience assessing organizational learning resulting from a network or a peer-learning process
Experience developing an evaluation plan that addresses the most pressing questions to explore and helping a client determine priorities
Experience assisting organizations in a multi-part evaluation process that includes planning, designing logic models, measuring organizational work against benchmarks, and analyzing data
Ability to help MDC reflect on its work in the broader field, with an orientation for co-learning and developing shared knowledge relating to the creation of tools and policies needed for systems-level change
Demonstrated ability to communicate with different audiences (e.g., low-wealth communities of color, public sector system leaders, business communities) in complex initiatives with multiple stakeholders

Preferred
- A racially diverse evaluation team
- Experience with network mapping
- Experience working with programs and/or organizations with a focus on educational equity
- Experience working with programs and/or organizations that have a focus on K-12 education
- Experience working with programs, organizations, or groups that focus on learning differences

Proposal Components
Narrative
The proposal should respond to the following:
- Describe your organization’s working experience with educational initiatives and work that centers equity, including racial equity
- Describe your organizations’ ability to meet the requirements of the scope of work described above
- The LENS-NC initiative includes MDC, Oak Foundation, and multiple partner organizations—briefly describe how you would approach working with our partnership
- Given the information you have about LENS-NC, tell us why your organization would be our best choice for this contract
- Share one or two creative evaluation approaches you might consider if your firm were hired

Attachments
The proposal should include the following attachments:
- Budget summary with preliminary estimates and fees for the first six months required to accomplish the described scope of work.
- Biographies of principal and key team members, including the diverse backgrounds or experiences they bring to the team
Recent client list and contact info for three client references
No more than three print or electronic samples that best exemplify your work and are most relevant to our topic and needs. Please include a brief narrative about why you selected each piece. If you have developed materials for different audiences on the same topic (e.g., parents, policymakers, teachers, etc.), please include these as one sample in your selection of three.

Submission Guidelines

Timeline
February 3, 2022       Release of request for proposal to selected consultants
February 28, 2022      Completed proposals due at 5 p.m. eastern standard time
March 1–7, 2022        Phone interviews with a selection committee
March 8–14, 2022       Phone interviews with finalists
March 21–25, 2022      Firm selection and contract negotiations

We are looking to work with a North Carolina consultant but will not decide on location alone. We will attempt to hold in-person meetings or events if it is safe to do so. As we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, we will evaluate what is safe and comfortable for MDC staff, Network staff, and evaluator(s). Work that cannot be done in person will be done remotely. Our goal is to interview selected finalists by March 14, 2022.

For questions about the request for proposal, please contact Elyse Griffin at edquity@mdcinc.org.

Attached for Your Information
1. The LENS-NC member organization information
2. Oak Foundation Learning Differences Programme information
3. Overview of the timeline for the LENS-NC Network

Completed proposals and accompanying budget are due by 5:00 p.m. eastern standard time on February 28, 2022, and should be submitted to Elyse Griffin at edequity@mdcinc.org.