

**CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE
EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT ACT
OF 1984**

South Carolina
Commission on
Higher Education

South
Carolina
Centers of
Excellence

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

**FISCAL YEAR
2026-2027**

***Effective Teacher Training that
Focuses on the Knowledge, Skills, and
Characteristics of the Profile of the
South Carolina Graduate***

Administered by:
S.C. Commission on Higher Education
1122 Lady Street, Suite 400
Columbia, SC 29201

Intent to Submit Form Due:
September 25, 2026

Technical Assistance Workshop
2:00-4:00 pm
September 30, 2026

Proposal Deadline:
November 6, 2026

For further information, please
contact:

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GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSION OF PROPOSALS

CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 1984 FY 2026-27

I. PURPOSE OF THE CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

The purpose of this competitive grant program is to enable eligible institutions, or groupings of such institutions, to serve as "state-of-the-art" resource centers for South Carolina in a specific area related to the improvement of teacher education. Teacher education encompasses both in-service and pre-service training. These "resource centers" develop and model state-of-the-art teaching practices, conduct research, disseminate information, and provide training for P-12 and higher education personnel in the Center's specific area of expertise. Research has shown that the single greatest factor influencing student achievement is teacher quality. In order for the state to attain its education goals, we must ensure that all students have access to highly qualified teachers and educational programs. Towards this goal, **the focus of the Centers of Excellence Program is to concentrate on assisting rural¹/underperforming² schools and districts.** The Commission on Higher Education (CHE) envisions the Center to be a university-wide effort. Typical activities include:

- developing and modeling state-of-the-art pre-service preparation programs for other institutions of higher education to emulate that focus on increasing the number of teachers appropriately prepared to work effectively with students in underperforming schools and with diverse needs;
- conducting statewide school-based and campus-based faculty development activities related to State content and assessment standards;
- conducting research and evaluation activities related to teacher quality and student achievement;
- serving as a state (and/or regional and national) clearinghouse for information dissemination on center activities; and
- providing demonstration, outreach, and technical assistance programs for low performing schools and districts and institutions of higher education as requested.

II. ELIGIBILITY

1. Institution Eligibility

Any public or independent institution of higher education in South Carolina authorized by the State Board of Education to offer one or more undergraduate or graduate educator preparation programs is eligible to apply. To support outreach to rural schools and/or underperforming schools, the Center is encouraged to engage faculty and students from across the institution, as appropriate to the proposed Center's focus.

¹ Definition of Rural, Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster(<https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/>).

² Underperforming refers to a school's rating that is "below average" or "unsatisfactory" based on the [South Carolina School Report Card](#).

The educator preparation program(s) associated with the proposed Center must maintain **full accreditation** throughout the application and award period. Proposals from programs that are under stipulation, probation, or any comparable accreditation sanction imposed by the applicable accrediting agency at the time of application will not be considered for funding.

Institutions that currently receive state funding for a Center of Excellence may apply for a second Center with a different focus. However, simultaneous state funding is limited to a maximum of two Centers per institution.

Institutions that fail to comply with CHE programmatic or fiscal reporting requirements are not eligible to submit a proposal during the funding cycle immediately following the finding of noncompliance.

Institutions interested in submitting a proposal for FY 2026–27 shall submit an **Intent to Submit Proposal** form to CHE by **September 25, 2026**. Submission of the Intent to Submit form does not obligate an institution to submit a proposal but assists CHE in planning the review process. A mandatory virtual Technical Assistance Workshop will be held on **September 30, 2026**, for all prospective Project Directors who submit an Intent to Submit form. Attendance at the workshop is required to submit a full proposal, which is due **November 6, 2026**.

2. Applicant Eligibility

The applicant must be a full-time tenure-track faculty member at an eligible institution and meet all eligibility requirements established in this RFP.

An individual serving as the current Project Director or Co-Project Director of a Centers of Excellence grant is not eligible to apply for or serve as the Project Director or Co-Project Director, or a role in any capacity of another Centers of Excellence grant during the same award period.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF A CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

1. Purpose

A Center of Excellence shall develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate innovative, evidence-based educator preparation practices that strengthen teacher preparation and improve PK–12 student learning. The Center shall serve as a catalyst for advancing educator preparation programs at the host institution and, as appropriate, share effective practices with other educator preparation programs across the state. Center activities shall focus on rural school(s)/district(s) and/or underperforming school(s)/district(s). Priority shall be given to projects serving schools and districts with an Education Accountability Act Report Card rating of "Below Average" or "Unsatisfactory" and/or a poverty index of 75 percent or greater.

The Center's activities shall directly support one or more educator preparation programs at the host institution and demonstrate measurable benefits for both educator preparation and PK–12 student learning. Activities shall be evidence-based, aligned with the proposed Center focus, responsive to the needs of participating schools and districts, and consistent with applicable South Carolina academic standards and state education priorities, including the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate.

2. Achievement of Excellence

A proposed Center shall demonstrate the capacity to successfully implement the proposed project and achieve the stated goals and objectives during the three-year award period. The proposal shall include annual measurable objectives, performance indicators, benchmarks, and expected outcomes to evaluate progress toward the approved project goals.

3. Institutional Commitment

The institution shall demonstrate its commitment to the proposed Center through financial support, in-kind contributions, faculty release time, facilities, equipment, curriculum enhancement, or other institutional resources.

The proposal shall demonstrate institutional support for sustaining successful project activities beyond the grant period. Matching support from institutional, business, community, or PK–12 partners is encouraged but not required.

4. Center Director's Commitment

The Center Director (s) must be committed to participating in training, mandatory director's quarterly meeting, and statewide activities throughout the award term.

The Project Director(s) shall not serve in any compensated or non-compensated role in another Centers of Excellence grant during the throughout the award period.

If the Center Director leaves the institution during the award period, the institution shall notify CHE immediately and submit a request, with supporting documentation and justification, for CHE's review and approval of a replacement Project Director or other appropriate grant management arrangement. CHE reserves the right to approve the request, transfer the grant within the institution, or rescind the remaining grant funds.

5. Collaboration with Related Centers, State Department of Education Initiatives, or Major Education Stakeholders

A Center **must** design its programs and activities as follows:

- in collaboration with rural school(s)/district(s) and/or underperforming school(s) and/or district(s) that will be the target of its activities;
- in collaboration with other Centers of Excellence and/or Teacher Recruitment Centers in all appropriate related activities;
- in collaboration with all parties affected by the Center's programs, including other institutions of higher education, other local school districts, professional associations, business and industry, parents, and the private sector; and
- be consistent with ongoing related curriculum, assessment, teacher preparation, or professional development activities at the South Carolina Department of Education, The Educational

Accountability Act, the Education Oversight Committee, the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate, and other state education initiatives.

IV. FUNDING

During FY2026-27, CHE will sponsor

- One Center of Excellence for AI-Enhanced Educator Preparation for a three-year award period, with funding of up to \$120,000 per year, subject to the availability of funds.
- Three Centers of Excellence for elementary Math Education, each for a three-year award period, with funding of up to \$85,000 per center per year, subject to the availability of funds.

V. DESIRED TOPICS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUNDING

1. Proposals must address one of the two areas listed below. All proposals must focus activities on rural school(s) or district(s) and/or an underperforming school(s) or district(s) as defined by the Education Accountability Act's [Report Card ratings](#). The priorities listed below reflect the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) 2020 Vision that "all students will graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary to compete successfully in the global economy, participate in a democratic society and contribute positively as members of families and communities." Achieving this vision requires the preparation of highly effective teachers.
 - a. Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming teaching, learning, and assessment in PK–12 education. As AI-powered instructional tools become increasingly available in schools, educator preparation programs have an opportunity to prepare future teachers to integrate AI with sound professional judgement effectively, ethically, and responsibly into classroom instruction. The desired topic is:
 - **Development of a Center of Excellence for AI-Enhanced Educator Preparation** to prepare pre-service teachers to effectively, ethically, and responsibly integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into PK–12 instruction through clinical experiences. The Center shall develop, implement, and evaluate an AI-enhanced clinical practice model that strengthens instructional decision-making, enhances candidates' reflective practice and self-assessment, and expands the capacity of educator preparation programs to provide timely, individualized feedback and coaching under the guidance of university supervisors and PK–12 mentor teachers. Expected outcomes include evidence-based guidelines and best practices for the ethical and responsible use of AI in PK–12 instruction and educator preparation, emphasizing sound professional judgment in instructional planning, assessment, student data privacy, and decision-making.
 - b. To support implementation of the 2025 South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Mathematics Standards and advance the Education Oversight Committee's educational priorities, the Commission on Higher Education seeks proposals focused on strengthening elementary mathematics instruction. The desired topic is:
 - **Development of three Centers of Excellence for Math Education**, each housed at an eligible institution to equip pre-service teachers with the pedagogical knowledge and

skills needed to integrate higher-order thinking and mathematical reasoning into instruction for students in Grades 1–5. The Centers shall focus on preparing pre-service teachers while providing structured mathematics tutoring for students in Grades 1–5 who need additional academic support. Priority will be given to proposals that incorporate the Concrete-Pictorial-Abstract (CPA) instructional approach.

2. Preference will be given to proposals that demonstrate meaningful collaboration with the targeted rural school(s)/district(s) and/or underperforming school(s)/district(s) in the planning and implementation of the proposed project.
3. Preference will be given to proposals that demonstrate the institution's commitment to sustaining and improving educator preparation programs as a result of the Center's work.
4. Preference will be given to proposals that demonstrate strong faculty expertise and institutional capacity in the proposed project area. Evidence may include faculty qualifications, scholarly work, PK–12 engagement, successful implementation of related initiatives, and institutional support.
5. Preference will be given to proposals that include a clear evaluation plan with measurable performance indicators to monitor implementation, assess project outcomes, and support continuous program improvement.
6. Preference will be given to proposals that demonstrate the potential for lasting impact and scalability beyond the grant period.
7. Finally, priority will be based on the likelihood that the program, if funded, will have a lasting impact on P-20 education in the State.

VI. EVALUATION

CHE reserves the right to conduct or commission independent evaluations of individual grant projects at any time during the grant cycle to assess program implementation, outcomes, accountability, and the effective use of public funds.

VII. IMPORTANT DATES

Intent to Submit Form Due: September 25, 2026
Virtual Technical Assistance Workshop: 2:00 – 4:00pm, September 30, 2026
Full Proposal Deadline: November 6, 2026

VIII. PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT

Specifications: Use the full proposal template provided. The proposal narrative shall not exceed 20 double-spaced pages (11-point Calibri, 1-inch margins) and shall comply with the current APA citation guidelines. Proposals shall include the following sections.

1. **Title Page** (form provided)
2. **Table of Contents**

3. **Abstract** to include (limit one page double-spaced, 1-inch margins, 11 pt. Calibri font):
- purpose of the project;
 - target population
 - activities to be implemented;
 - expected outcomes; and
 - participating school(s) and/or district(s), including rural designation and/or school performance status

4. **Narrative**

- a. **The Center's Need and Purpose:** Describe the proposed Center's purpose and focus. Explain the demonstrated need for the project and how it will benefit the institution, participating PK–12 schools/districts, and educator preparation in South Carolina.

- b. **Literature Review.** Provide the theoretical ground for the proposed work.

c. **Goals and Objectives:**

The Education Oversight Committee set six goals for EIA programs: 1) Improving Teacher Quality, 2) Increasing School Readiness and Early Learning Success, 3) Supporting Struggling Students, 4) Emphasizing Learning in Content Areas, 5) Improving Connections across K-12 Education, Career and Post-Secondary, and 6) Measuring and Evaluation Progress of Student Performance.

Describe the Center's goals and measurable objectives. Goals and objectives shall align with the applicable Education Oversight Committee goals, the proposed Center focus, and relevant South Carolina academic standards, as appropriate.

d. **Project Design and Activities:**

Describe the proposed activities and explain how they will achieve the project goals and objectives.

- project implementation plan;
- major activities;
- annual benchmarks and deliverables;
- timeline for implementation; and
- expected measurable outcomes for each year of funding.

- e. **Research:** Describe how research, evidence, and project data will be used to improve implementation and educator preparation throughout the grant period.

- f. **Evaluation Plan:** Describe how project implementation and outcomes will be evaluated. The evaluation plan shall include:

- measurable performance indicators;
- data collection methods and timeline;
- outcome measures for educator preparation and PK–12 student learning;
- procedures for monitoring progress and making program improvements; and
- dissemination of project findings.

- g. **Institutional Strengths:** Describe the institution's capacity to successfully implement the

proposed Center. Include evidence of:

- faculty expertise;
- previous accomplishments related to the proposed Center;
- institutional resources;
- experience working with PK–12 schools; and
- successful implementation of related initiatives.

h. **Center Staffing:** Identify the Project Director, Co-Project Director (if applicable), and other key personnel.

- qualifications;
- responsibilities;
- percent effort or time commitment; and
- organizational structure.

Attach abbreviated curricula vitae (maximum two pages) for key personnel.

Proposals must disclose participation of family members as it relates to the Ethics Act, the Ethics Commission opinions, and the State Ethics Commission.

i. **Institutional and Partnerships Commitment**

- partner schools and districts;
- roles, responsibilities, and benefits of each partner;
- collaborative planning completed prior to submission;
- institutional commitment to the project; and
- plans to sustain successful activities beyond the grant period.

Letters of institutional and partner support shall be included.

j. **Discussion of Similar and Related Centers:** Provide a brief description of similar state or national centers and explain how the proposed Center differs from, complements, or builds upon existing efforts.

k. **Current Initiatives/Programs:** Describe existing institutional initiatives that support the proposed Center and explain how they complement the proposed project. Provide available outcome data demonstrating previous success.

l. **Collaborative Planning:** Provide a detailed description of the collaborative planning efforts that have occurred between the institutions, the partner district(s)/school(s), and any other participating organization or agencies. Provide information on possible collaboration with other Centers of Excellence.

5. **Timeline.** Provide a detailed project timeline identifying major activities, benchmarks, and deliverables for each year of funding.

6. **Budget:** Provide a proposed budget and budget justification for the first year of the proposed three-year award period. The proposed budget shall identify all anticipated expenditures for personnel, fringe benefits, equipment, materials, travel, contractual services (if applicable), and other operating expenses necessary to implement the proposed project during the first award year. Proposed

personnel expenditures shall provide sufficient detail to identify and justify each position, the level of effort associated with each position, and the estimated salary or stipend. Institutional overhead and indirect costs are not allowable. A complete justification for all proposed expenditures shall accompany the budget summary. Budget requests should demonstrate a reasonable return on investment by aligning proposed expenditures with anticipated project outcomes.

- Grant funds shall be used to supplement, not supplant, existing institutional resources.
- Total personnel compensation, including faculty and staff stipends, course releases or course buyouts, graduate assistants/student worker compensation, and applicable fringe benefits, shall not exceed 50% of the total proposed budget. Compensation (including fringes) and GAD for graduate assistants shall be no more than 15% of the total budget and must be included in the 50% maximum for salaries and fringe benefits. This limitation does not apply to stipends paid to pre-service teachers providing tutoring services within the scope of the project in PK–12 schools.
- Requests for faculty course release or course buyouts shall comply with the institution's established policies and procedures and include sufficient justification demonstrating the relationship between the requested release time and the approved project activities. If an institution does not have an established course release or course buyout policy, the budget justification shall include documentation demonstrating that the requested amount is reasonable, consistent with institutional compensation practices, and commensurate with the scope of work proposed. In either case, a letter of approval from the Provost or the Provost's designee shall be required.
- Grant funds shall not be used to pay both tuition and participant stipends to the same individual during the same period.
- Institutions are encouraged to utilize internal expertise whenever appropriate before engaging external consultants. Requests for external consulting services shall include detailed justification. If external consulting services are proposed, the total cost shall not exceed 5% of the institution's total annual grant award unless otherwise approved in writing by CHE. A detailed justification describing the consultant's qualifications, scope of work, deliverables, basis for compensation, and anticipated benefit to the approved project shall accompany the proposed budget.
- The grant shall not be used for any cost-of-living increase.
- Grant funds may be used for food and refreshments only for approved in-person participant training activities.
- Grant funds shall not be used to support internal or external project evaluations.
- Grant funds shall not be used to purchase office furniture or clothing.
- All proposed expenditures shall comply with applicable institutional policies and the South Carolina Consolidated Procurement Code and Procurement Regulations.
- Grant funds may be used to support institutional professional membership fees directly related to the approved project. Individual professional memberships are not allowable. Institutional membership fees shall not exceed \$1,000 per institution annually without prior written approval from CHE.
- The purchase of electronic devices or equipment with a unit cost exceeding \$1,000 requires prior written approval from CHE. All electronic equipment purchases shall be reasonable, necessary, directly support the approved project activities, and be fully justified in the proposed budget, including a description of the intended use of the equipment.

- Travel expenditures shall be reasonable, necessary, directly support the approved project activities, and comply with applicable institutional policies and state travel regulations.
- Grant funds shall be used only to support costs directly associated with approved project participants. Institutional faculty, staff, administrators, and other employees shall not be considered project participants and are not eligible for participant support, including meals, refreshments, travel, registration fees, lodging, or other participant-related expenses, unless specifically authorized in this RFP or approved in writing by CHE.
- Institutional faculty and staff shall not be considered project participants and are not eligible to receive participant stipends.

Awarded Centers shall submit a proposed budget and budget justification for each subsequent project year in accordance with the timeline established by CHE. Continued funding beyond the first year is contingent upon the availability of funds, satisfactory project performance, and CHE approval of the annual budget.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to review the *Centers of Excellence Grant Administration Guidelines* when preparing the proposed budget. The Grant Administration Guidelines provide additional requirements and guidance regarding allowable costs, budget administration, procurement, equipment management, reimbursement procedures, grant management, and project closeout.

7. Acknowledgement of Support

An acknowledgement of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education must appear in any publication of materials based on or developed under this project as follows:

The activity which is the subject of this document (journal article, report, video, etc.) was produced under a grant from the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education under the auspices of the EIA Centers of Excellence Grant Program.

All media announcements, public information, and promotional materials pertaining to these funded activities should acknowledge support of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education under the auspices of the EIA Centers of Excellence Grant Program.

IX. PROPOSAL SUBMISSION, METHOD OF SELECTION AND OTHER PROCEDURES

Proposals must be submitted as an electronic copy (Word document for proposal narrative, PDF for complete proposal with signature pages, and Excel for budget), must be signed by the President of the proposing institution, and must be addressed to the Commission on Higher Education: Dr. Lishu Yin (lyin@che.sc.gov). They must be received by 5:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on **November 6, 2026**. The following method of selection and other procedures will be followed:

1. Proposals will be reviewed by external reviewers with expertise relevant to the proposed project. Reviewers may include representatives from the South Carolina Department of Education, current or former Centers of Excellence Project Directors, and the PK–12 and higher education communities.
2. The reviewers will forward recommendations to the CHE.