

November 13, 2017

Ms. Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW., Room 6W231
Washington, DC 20202

Docket ID ED-2017-OS-0078

Dear Ms. Bell-Ellwanger:

On behalf of the American Library Association (ALA) and our 57,000 members, I am writing to thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the U.S. Department of Education (ED)'s Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs.

Libraries play an instrumental role in advancing formal educational programs as well as informal learning from pre-school through post-secondary education and beyond. Libraries possess relevant information, technology, experts, and community respect and trust to propel education and learning. Libraries—120,000 strong—are present in communities, schools, colleges & universities in every part of the country be it rural, urban, suburban, tribal and other communities. Thus, libraries are ideally suited to leverage this existing infrastructure, enabling a high return on investment on projects and support many of the ED's priorities.

Therefore, we ask that you consider the following recommendations to the Proposed Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs to help support the vital role that libraries play in improving our nation's education and workforce development systems throughout the country.

Proposed Priority 3— Fostering Flexible and Affordable Paths to Obtaining Knowledge and Skills

It is absolutely critical that we ensure our nation's workforce is prepared to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive global economy. In order to meet these challenges, libraries across the country have been at the forefront, helping to support schools and communities broadly in educating students and equipping adult learners with the skills needed to succeed in today's workforce.

America's libraries constitute a critical national infrastructure that advances education, employment and entrepreneurship, personal empowerment and community engagement. Nearly all of our nation's public libraries offer the public wired and wireless Internet access and have dedicated digital resources and technology training that support workforce development, in the form of obtaining digital literacy and online certifications to advance individual careers.

Moreover, within these libraries there are more than 136,000 staff members that develop and provide a diverse range of locally relevant resources and services.

Libraries are also at the forefront of the sharing economy and co-working. Libraries of all sizes are increasingly providing dedicated co-working spaces for freelancers and contractors. The Akron-Summit County (Ohio) Public Library has a Microbusiness Center and Co-working space. It also offers easy access to a business librarian, databases that facilitate competitive analysis and market research, an audio recording studio, and other tech resources to generate prototypes or promotional materials as business plans evolve.

Accordingly, we recommend that Proposed Priority 3 (Fostering Flexible and Affordable Paths to Obtaining Knowledge and Skills) be updated to recognize the contributions that libraries make in helping to connect students and adult learners with internships and apprenticeships that lead to careers in in-demand industries and that it specifically include libraries as eligible entities and/or allowable partners to help educate and develop a well-prepared workforce.

Proposed Priority 6— Promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science.

As the 21st century global economy continues to evolve, STEM and particularly computer science skills are more important than ever before. In an effort to ensure that all students and adult learners have access to these skills, public libraries across the country are stepping up efforts to support opportunities and activities that promote computer science and computational thinking and set students up for success in these high-need fields.

In an effort to ensure that all of our nation’s libraries are equipped with the resources and capacity to offer coding programs for students and families in their communities, ALA announced its [*Libraries Ready to Code*](#) initiative, sponsored by Google, which provides competitive grants to create a toolkit that any librarian can use to get his or her library “Ready to Code.” This ongoing collaboration between ALA and Google will provide funding as well as consulting expertise and operational support to libraries in order to ensure that expert library professionals are prepared to develop and deliver high-quality coding programming and activities.

We greatly appreciate that ED’s Proposed Priority 6 includes a mention of supporting partnerships between schools, public libraries and other partners that provide accessible digital learning resources as a way to improve and promote STEM and Computer Science educational opportunities. We agree that libraries play a key role in providing access to digital books and other digitized resources that can inspire STEM learning however, we believe that further language should be included to highlight the high-quality STEM and Computer Science programming taking place in our nation’s libraries.

For example, teenagers can participate in a coding club run through the Onondaga Free Library in Syracuse (NY). Coding curriculum at schools is a growing but still infrequent program and

many public libraries supplement this growing demand by providing space, computers, Wi-Fi connectivity, relevant books and other materials, and expertise.

Students at Silver Spring (MD) International Middle School work together to tackle several coding challenges collaboratively as the school librarian and science teacher co-teach a robotics course at part of their Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) program.

Therefore, we recommend that Proposed Priority 6 (Promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science) be updated to also include partnerships between schools and libraries that also facilitate programming for students and offer professional development for library staff and other educators to help them deliver rigorous STEM and Computer Science programming and instruction. We also recommend that Proposed Priority 6 be updated to explicitly recognize school and public libraries as eligible entities for competitive grant programs which aim to better support STEM and Computer Science educational opportunities.

Proposed Priority 7— Promoting Literacy

Librarians foster a love of reading through programming and book lending, as well as supply childcare providers and teachers with resources to advance the cognitive development of children. With many thousands of locations, libraries are in communities of all sizes and deliver critical learning resources for families. Fortunately, there are more than 16,500 public libraries, in every corner of this country, staffed by literacy professionals who deliver services tailored to the needs of each community and are available to all members of the community, regardless of economic status. Many public libraries offer summer reading programs to stem the “summer slide” and ensure children maintain literacy skills year round.

The Virginia Beach (VA) Public Library works with school librarians and teachers to run summer learning programs in Title I schools, with reading, journaling and hands-on activities. A vast majority of participants have maintained or improved reading skills as a result. The Salt Lake County (UT) Library’s research-based early literacy storytime at the Road Home’s Community Shelter promotes parental engagement and reading readiness. The library also provides donated books to the homeless shelter for families to enjoy.

Our nation’s more than 120,000 school libraries play an important role in advancing literacy development. School librarians typically assist students in finding age and skill level appropriate reading material and often manage electronic readers for students. The Owsley (KY) County Schools is currently implementing an ED Grant (Innovative Approaches to Literacy) that uses evidence based programming and technology to offer literacy support for children at the pre-school through 3rd grade. The program is working to ensure all its students enter school ready to learn and stay on reading-level.

Our nation’s public library systems are equipped to deliver critical literacy resources to young children, students and families, especially those most in need. However, in far too many instances, libraries are NOT included in Federal programming.

Therefore, ALA recommends that Proposed Priority 7 (Promoting Literacy) be updated to include references to the work being done every day in school and public libraries across the nation and that it specifically include libraries as eligible entities and or/allowable partners to help ensure that libraries can continue to provide a range of literacy material, services, and devices for students at all ages.

Proposed Priority 9— Promoting Economic Opportunity

[Libraries](#) are established centers for learning and advancement. People use libraries to improve job skills, access new technologies, pursue vocational and educational programs, start new businesses, and advance research. Libraries also enable economic opportunity more broadly—by engaging with families to prepare children to succeed in school, for instance, and providing vital information on health and personal finance. With 120,000 locations, libraries are everywhere—including economically struggling communities.

Leveraging libraries to advance economic opportunity is cost-effective. This national infrastructure is already in place, ready to accommodate new programs.

Library professionals provide resources to improve job skills, obtain certifications, prepare for the GED and vocational tests, and explore new careers. For example, the Port Townsend (WA) Library’s Transition Yourself initiative assists job seekers to assess current circumstances and goals, find job training, and make work transitions.

Even learning to drive a forklift may be accomplished at a library. At the Orlando (FL) Public Library, its Melrose Center hosts dedicated simulators for operating forklifts and excavators, and for driving vehicles and flying an airplane, along with corresponding training classes.

Therefore, ALA recommends that Proposed Priority 9 (Promoting Economic Opportunity) be updated to reflect that libraries are centers for lifelong learning, career advancement and transition.

Proposed Priority 11 — Ensuring that Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families Have Access to High-Quality Educational Choices

As safe places where people want to help and core professional values of respect and confidentiality are upheld, libraries are ideally situated to help service members, veterans and their families obtain assistance on educational opportunities. For example, college libraries help with the transition to civilian life. The library at the University of Alabama teaches classes as part of the “Military to College: Making the Transition” course.

More broadly, libraries are places where service providers connect with service members, veterans and their families. In California, Veterans [Connect](#) @ the Library hosts 38 Veteran

Resource Centers in libraries at which clients may obtain information about careers, academic programs, and educational benefits with peer counseling from a volunteer veteran.

Therefore, ALA recommends that Proposed Priority 11 (Ensuring that Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families Have Access to High-Quality Educational Choices) be updated to reflect the work libraries do to connect veterans and their families to a wide array of services and benefits as emphasized in this priority.

Our nation's libraries stand ready to help meet the growing education and workforce needs of our economy and stand ready to help with each of these Proposed Priorities, but we can only do so if policies and final priorities are crafted in a way that allows for better collaboration and coordination between libraries and Federal programs.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any additional questions or need any information regarding ways in which our nation's libraries can help to improve educational opportunities in communities across the nation.

Sincerely,

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