

# Innovation Funding Initiative

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## Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) Final FAQs (1/21/26)

### **Who is eligible to apply?**

Lead Applicants include: (1) Orange County school districts serving students in grades TK-12 (including elementary school districts, high school districts, or unified school districts); or (2) a Consortium of Orange County districts serving students in grades TK-12 with one district as the lead applicant.

- Districts apply with input from one or more school sites (assuming school site intervention)
- Districts may submit more than one application, but any district (as a lead) will receive no more than one award per cohort

*School sites, LEAs outside of Orange County, and other non-LEA entities are not eligible to apply. While this current funding opportunity prioritizes districts, Charter schools may be eligible for future rounds of funding.*

### **Are community college districts and/or community colleges eligible to apply?**

No, community college districts and/or community colleges are not eligible to apply. Applicants must be Orange County school districts serving grades TK-12, or a consortium of Orange County school districts serving students in grades TK-12.

### **Can Charter Schools apply? (Are Charter Schools eligible for this funding?)**

No, Charter Schools are not eligible to apply. While this current funding opportunity prioritizes Orange County school districts, Charter Schools may be eligible for future rounds of funding.

### **As an independent charter school and our own LEA, I wanted to know if we are eligible for any funding, given that we are not a traditional "district."**

No, Charter Schools are not eligible to apply. While this current funding opportunity prioritizes Orange County school districts, Charter Schools may be eligible for future rounds of funding.

### **Can an ROP apply?**

No, ROPs are not eligible to apply. Applicants must be Orange County school districts serving grades TK-12, or a consortium of Orange County school districts serving students in grades TK-12.

### **Can schools apply?**

No, schools are not eligible to apply. Applicants must be Orange County school districts serving grades TK-12, or a consortium of Orange County school districts serving students in grades TK-12. If a school has an innovation project they would like to pursue, they are encouraged to discuss with their district leadership whether the district has interest in submitting an application for that project.

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## **Are there restrictions on which Orange County school districts can apply (e.g., only those identified in DA or Title I)?**

Any Orange County school district serving grades TK-12 (including elementary school districts, high school districts, or unified school districts); or a Consortium of Orange County districts serving students in grades TK-12 with one district as the lead applicant may apply.

## **Does the \$525,000 need to be split evenly across the three years?**

No. The funding distribution does not need to be evenly split across the three years. An applicant can propose whatever budget makes sense for their particular project across the three years, as long as they justify the breakout of costs across the years.

## **May we submit multiple applications?**

Districts may submit more than one application. However, a district may only receive one funding award per round.

## **Are matching funds required?**

Matching funds are not required for this funding opportunity.

## **How is OCDE defining innovation for this program?**

*Innovation* is the implementation of a new strategy or novel application of strategies designed to address an unmet need in an educational context. Innovative practices improve efficiency or student outcomes. While innovative practices may not be evidence-based, innovations should be grounded in theory, responsive to the needs of the population of interest, and capable of producing sustainable, scalable, and replicable change.

## **Is grant funding permitted for external professional development services provided by a partner organization to implement innovative practices and improve student outcomes? Or does OCDE provide the necessary training and implementation support upon award?**

Funding may be used to contract for services provided by a partner organization to implement innovative practices and improve student outcomes, as long as the applicant justifies the need for the service as part of the innovation. OCDE will provide implementation coaching to support high quality implementation of the proposed innovation.

**Can OCDE programs provide a letter of support to district applicants to support their application?** No, OCDE may not provide letters of support for applicants under this Innovation Funding opportunity. Additionally, OCDE may not partner with or be in any way involved in the development or ideation of the innovation project that is being proposed or in the application process. These activities pose a conflict of interest and may disqualify applications from consideration for funding.

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## **Can one application involve multiple schools, or just one school?**

While the applicant must be a school district or Consortium of districts, implementation at one or more school sites is highly encouraged. Schools that will serve as implementation sites must be involved in developing the funding application.

## **How might we sign up for the ListServ?**

Sign up for updates using the Google Form at this [link](#). You may also access the form through the Innovation Funding Initiative website, <https://ocde.us/InnovationFunding/Pages/Email-Sign-Up.aspx>

## **Is there a structure in that small, mid and large districts have opportunity to be granted?**

### **Different size will write different apps, is there a process in that all size can be awarded?**

OCDE intends to fund a variety of projects across districts of different types (e.g., unified school districts, high school districts, elementary school districts). In addition, OCDE recognizes that districts of different sizes have distinct needs, contexts, and levels of available capacity. The selection process has been designed to ensure that no district is advantaged or disadvantaged based on size. While district size is not a selection criterion, OCDE aims to support a balanced portfolio of projects that reflects the diversity of Orange County's districts, including a range of district types and sizes.

## **Can text in tables be single-spaced?**

Yes, text in tables may be single-spaced. Be sure to adhere to specified formatting provided in the RFA for other spacing, margins, and font sizes.

## **Is OCDE ACCESS eligible to apply?**

No. OCDE ACCESS is not eligible to apply for or receive funding under the Innovation Funding Initiative. Moreover, no OCDE program may receive funding as part of a district or Consortium application.

**Added January 13, 2026**

## **What is the expectation for school site input?**

It depends on your innovation, but we are looking for buy in and readiness. Applicant should demonstrate school site buy-in and readiness, with a description of how the school site leadership was engaged in the process of developing the project and/or application. Moreover, the idea may originate from a school site or the district, but what is important is that the applicant describe the process for establishing buy-in on the project and readiness for implementation.

## **Will you pool small districts with larger districts in the selection process?**

No. We will not pool applications based on district size for scoring and review. However, the process for final selection of projects will take into consideration district type (i.e. elementary districts, unified school districts, union high school districts) and project focus area. Final selections will reflect a balance of district types and content areas. See page 24 of the RFA for information on our process.

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## **Can the applicant choose who provides professional development?**

Yes. If selected for funding, the awardee will choose the vendor it determines best suited to providing support or services. Districts must follow their established processes and rules for identifying and contracting with vendors/providers.

## **Can you define what salaries are allowable?**

Applicants may cover part or all of a position's salary and benefits, as long as the applicant justifies that position as necessary to the implementation or success of the project. In the budget narrative, the applicant must address the need for the allocated amount of a staff member's time and role on the project, as well as their availability (if they currently have another role) to commit the time needed to the project.

## **Can we use pictures (i.e. classroom photos) within the narrative?**

Yes, you may include pictures. You may include photos (or graphics, tables, etc.) within the Project Narrative or in the Appendix as long as you remain within the stated page limits, and as long as the full application submitted with all documents is under 30mb. Additionally, we recommend labeling and captioning photos, and ensuring they are understandable if printed in grayscale (or black and white). As always, carefully review the required elements and page limits of both the Project Narrative and the Appendix before deciding where to add photos or graphics. Be sure to refer to supplemental materials in the narrative, as appropriate.

## **Are you opposed to project ideas originating from districts, or must the idea originate from a school site?**

Innovation project ideas can originate from either the district and school sites.

## **Does there need to be a specific school site or can it be all sites?**

Projects can be implemented at one or more school sites, with all students, or a subset of students. Moreover, some projects may begin at one or two sites, and roll out to more sites within the three-year project period, or may stay within the original sites for the duration of the project period. It really depends on the nature of the innovation being proposed. Applicants are asked to share their plans for scaling the project during and/or after the project period. See pages 22 and 27 of the RFA, as well as the Question 5 prompt in the Application Narrative Template, for more information on plans for scaling the project.

## **Do we need a plan to scale out to neighboring districts?**

No. There is no expectation that a district will scale the project to other districts. However, applicants are asked to describe their preliminary plans for scaling the project either during the project period or after the project period ends. See pages 22 and 27 of the RFA, as well as the Question 5 prompt in the Application Narrative Template, for more information on plans for scaling the project.

## **Do the letters of support need to be double-spaced?**

No. Letters of support can be single-spaced.



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**Can a table be included in the narrative section? I am looking at creating a small table with the roles and responsibilities for section 3. Feasibility of Project describing key roles and responsibilities.**

Applicants may include a small table in the project narrative. Tables do count towards the 20-page Project Narrative limit. Tables must not contain large portions of descriptive text, which is best suited for the narrative itself.

**Added January 21, 2026**

**Are we writing our goals for the three year cycle?**

Goals can be written for any increment of time, and different goals can include different timelines. It depends on the applicant's innovation and the rate of progress expected. Be sure to include intermediate objectives for longer-term goals, in order to measure progress towards outcomes on at least an annual basis. Progress towards goals will be reported on the annual evaluation report. Goals that extend before the life of the project can also be included, to demonstrate sustainability, but there should be intermediate measures of progress and success included during the project period.

**Where can we find all of the elements listed in the application?**

All application materials, including templates and forms, are on the Innovation Funding Initiative webpage at <https://ocde.us/InnovationFunding/Pages/FullRFA.aspx>

**Do we need to remove the name and details of our district for the review to be blind?**

OCDE will redact identifying district and school information, along with any other identifying information, from all applications prior to review and scoring. A unique identifier that is randomly generated will be assigned to each application. Applicants may include staff names, as appropriate in the application. That information will also be redacted for the review and scoring process. While it is ok to use the district and/or school names in the application, applicants may want to consider using phrases such as "our district" in place of repeated references to the specific school district name throughout the application. The applicant must, however, include district and school site names where specifically requested on application forms.

**We are embedding the chart of project personnel within our proposal - should we enter a name and you will redact it? Or should we leave that blank?**

Applicants may include staff names. OCDE will redact those names for the purpose of review and scoring. However, including names of staff may demonstrate readiness, capacity, and expertise, so please include names in the application as appropriate.

**Do you want titles? or personnel names?**

Identify if there is a person currently in the role who is instrumental to project implementation. This may show greater readiness for implementation. Or, identify if a staff member will be hired or identified upon funding.

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## **Should everything be submitted in PDF format?**

Yes. The entire application shall be submitted in one PDF document, except for the Budget Workbook, which shall be submitted in Excel format. Please refer to the RFA for additional details regarding what must be included in the PDF, file size limits and naming conventions.

## **If something is wrong in the application, will it be sent back to us to correct and resubmit?**

No. Applications that are submitted improperly will not be considered. OCDE highly recommends using the Application Checklist to ensure all forms are included and complete, checking for compliance with page limit restrictions, and other requirements.

## **If we miss any required elements, will our application not be accepted?**

All applications that meet all requirements and eligibility by the established timeline will be forwarded for review and scoring. OCDE will not respond to applicants with a request for missing components. If an applicant submits before the established deadline, and realizes they forgot to include a component, they may re-submit their application, as long as it is submitted by the established deadline and contains the word "RE-SUBMIT" in the subject line.

## **Directions state a Table of Contents is not required but highly recommended. Does a cover page and a table of contents count toward the 20 page narrative, or would page 1 start with the Heading and text?**

A cover page and a table of contents do not count towards the 20 page project narrative limit. Page 1 would start with the applicant's responses to the project narrative prompts. Please note that any information provided before the responses to narrative prompts (e.g., cover page, table of contents) will not be reviewed as part of scoring. A cover page and/or table of contents is simply designed to help organize the application and guide the reviewer to where they can find information contained within the application. They will not be scored.

## **Can districts utilize the County's indirect cost rate of 9.32% as the metric when writing the District's Innovation Grant proposal?**

Applicants must use their own state-approved district indirect cost rate.

## **If we add links in the application will they be considered? Will the raters follow the links? We have a news story we would like the grant readers to view.**

Reviewers will not include in their scoring any information that is provided by applicants outside of the 20 page project narrative, budget spreadsheet, budget narrative or Appendix. If applicants want to ensure that reviewers are aware of a news story, consider mentioning it in the narrative where appropriate. If it is a written story, the story (or portions of it) may be included as excerpts either in the narrative or in the Appendix. If it is a video story, a description of the story may be included.

## **Do we (and can we) include a title page?**

Applicants may include a title page. A title page and table of contents will not count towards the narrative page limit.

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## **How should we prioritize what information we provide since we are running over the page limit?**

OCDE recommends using the point allocations in the scoring rubric to determine the approximate number of pages per section. Applicants may wish to dedicate more pages to sections with higher point values, and fewer pages to sections with lower point values. In the end, the applicant must decide how much content to include in each section to address the question prompts. See section IV-A of the RFA, for details on application scoring.

## **How does the redaction process work? Will the application be separated out, or given to reviewers as is?**

Any documents containing identifying information will be redacted prior to review and scoring. Additionally, a title page, table of contents, application checklist, applicant agreements form, and applicant information form will not be forwarded to reviewers, as these are primarily intended for screening and processing. A cover sheet will be created to accompany the project narrative, budget narrative, budget workbook and appendix for review purposes. The cover sheet will contain information such as the project title and abstract, funding amount requested, primary and secondary content focus areas, district type (e.g., elementary district, high school district, unified school district), and a uniquely assigned identifier. District or school-identifying information in the narrative, budget documents, or Appendix will be redacted (i.e. blacked out or removed) prior to review and scoring.

## **Will feedback be provided to districts at the conclusion of the review process?**

Some feedback will be provided to those applicants who request it within 30 days of award announcements.

## **Can we use the district's current approved cost for indirect expenses?**

Yes. Please use the district's 2025-26 approved indirect cost rate in applicant's budget proposal.

## **Can we build salary increases into our budgets?**

Yes, and it may be helpful to include an explanation of the increases in the budget narrative.

## **Should the implementation plan and metrics table be in the narrative or the appendix?**

The Metrics Table is required and may be placed in either the project narrative or the Appendix. It will count towards the page limit of whichever document in which it appears. The Implementation Plan ideally should appear in the *Project Design and Quality* section of the project narrative. This is a key component of this section. Be sure to include the main objectives, activities, milestones, and measures of progress in the Implementation Plan within this section of the project narrative. If the applicant desires to include a more detailed implementation plan in the Appendix, they may. However, the narrative will be the primary source for review and scoring.

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## **We are considering including a logic model. Can this replace the Metrics Table or Implementation Plan?**

A logic model is optional, and may not take the place of the required Metrics Table and required Implementation Plan. There will likely be some overlap between the activities/outputs included in the logic model and the implementation plan, as well as some overlap between the metrics table and the outputs/outcomes included in a logic model. However, the logic model does not provide a 1:1 relationship among these components, instead providing a higher-level roadmap that organizes the various components of the program.

## **Will we be able to see what other ideas were submitted?**

OCDE will discuss internally whether there will be a public release of proposal topics, including those projects not selected for funding.