Guidance for Early Years applicants

Professional development and leadership in the early years: building evidence to close the gap.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Department for Education (DfE) are looking to fund and evaluate early years education projects focussed on professional development and leadership, in order to improve the learning and development of children from low income families aged 0–5.

Context and background

There is good evidence that the quality of early years education has an important impact on a range of developmental outcomes. The new Study of Quality of Early Years Provision identifies a number of factors that affect quality, including training plans, qualifications, and ratios. However, we know much less about which approaches to improving quality are most effective and the best ways of recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining practitioners to improve learning outcomes in early years settings and Reception.

The aim of this funding round is to provide support for initiatives focused on professional development and leadership in the early years. This could include, for example: how settings use evidence from research to inform their practice, professional learning between and within settings, how staff monitor and assess children’s development and use this to inform their practice, and focused training and support in relation to key outcomes (see scope below). We are open to ideas that can demonstrate clear theory of how the approach will lead to improvements in practice, and ultimately learning outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This funding round is intended to complement and build on high levels of interest in the Nuffield Foundation and EEF’s recent call for proposals to test promising interventions in the early years through rigorous evaluation. This new EEF/DfE round will bring complementary funding and a specific focus on professional development. It is also intended to encourage bids from schools and early years settings that have promising approaches that could be developed, tested and adopted more widely. We expect that many applications will require piloting and formative evaluation to test their feasibility, theory of change, and evidence of promise, rather than large-scale impact evaluation. Independent evaluation teams will be appointed to support successful applicants with developing their approaches, and/or testing evidence for the programme’s impact. We encourage applicants to consult reviews of the wider evidence base in preparing their applications.
**Scope**

We are interested in proposals that will:

- Support high quality professional development, and leadership in the early years, including in Reception;
- Through these changes, improve practice quality, and children’s outcomes in early language and literacy development, early numeracy, and/or self-regulation; and
- Narrow the development gap between socio-economically disadvantaged pupils and their peers at (or before) age 5;

We will prioritise bids that have strong theory or evidence that they are likely to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children, and that are ready to be evaluated. We will consider both formative evaluations for earlier-stage initiatives, and impact evaluations of more developed ideas. We are also interested in approaches that have been successfully evaluated internationally and could be adapted for settings in England.

**Criteria**

Proposals should:

- **Focus on improving the learning of disadvantaged children in England through supporting professional development and leadership.** See ‘scope’ above.

- **Be informed and supported by strong theory of change or evidence of impacting on educational outcomes, particularly language and literacy, early numeracy and/or self-regulation.** We would like applicants to outline how their proposal applies the findings of rigorous research from wider literature.

- **Be practical, cost-effective and scalable.** Our aim is to identify approaches that, if shown to be successful, could be taken on by schools, nurseries, PVIs, children’s centres, or other early years providers. Therefore we are only interested in developing and testing initiatives that are practical and cost-effective to deliver.

- **Be willing and able to be independently evaluated.** We will appoint an independent evaluator, and work with successful applicants to design an appropriate evaluation plan. Note that this does not need to be included in your project plan and budget.

**How to apply**

Please read this guidance note alongside the standard guidance for our funding round, and the Frequently Asked Questions section on our website. An application form for the Early Years funding round can be accessed here, and then clicking ‘Apply Now’. Please note that once you have logged on to EEF’s online application system, there is a specific application form for the Early Years funding round.

The funding round is open from Thursday 14th December 2017 until Friday 16th March 2018. We expect to make final funding decisions in June 2018.