

Request for Proposals Evaluation Guide

Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to assist State and local education agencies in defining the evaluation process for a Request for Proposal (RFP). It offers a suggested structure to the evaluation that allows input from a wide range of participants and specific subject matter experts, permits flexibility and weighted scoring in appropriate areas and provides an objective and defensible process for determining the vendor finalist.

The first step is to determine the major components of the RFP to be scored and publish that high-level evaluation method in the RFP document itself. A sample evaluation breakdown might be as follows:

- Written Proposal 15%
- Functional Requirements 25%
- Cost 20%
- Vendor Demonstrations 35%
- Reference Check 5%

The vendor demonstrations comprise the largest weight in the scoring process. This is intentional because not only can the evaluation team see the product first hand and make its own judgments, but also the team can get an understanding of the proposing vendor, their agency and the proposed implementation team. The percentages above can vary based on the preference of the agency, but it is recommended that the demonstrations be the largest component of the evaluation.

A wide range of stakeholders should contribute to the evaluation of the vendors and their proposed solutions. Not all participants need to be involved in every component but it is wise, depending on the size of the agency, to have a core team of 8–10 individuals. Table 1 provides an example of the subgroups and their participation level in the RFP evaluation and vendor selection process.

Table 1
Stakeholders

Group	Makeup	Involvement
Core Evaluation Team	Group of 8 – 10 individuals who are involved in every aspect of the evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Read and score written proposals ▪ Review functional requirement responses ▪ Review cost response ▪ Evaluate vendor finalists' demonstrations ▪ Participate in final vendor selection
Demonstration Evaluation Committee	Group of 20 – 30 people (including core evaluation team)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evaluate vendor finalists' demonstrations ▪ Participate in final vendor recommendation
Agency's Leadership	Cabinet or director-level leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Act on recommendation of Evaluation Committee

The scoring methodology below this high level would not be provided in the RFP document but should be clearly thought out and decided upon in advance. Vendor responses should be evaluated

relative to each other rather than against some exact set of criteria. One method to accomplish this is to assign point values to the various components listed above, standardize to some equal number the maximum value for each component, assign the highest scoring vendor the highest point value for the section, prorate the remaining vendor scores based on the best response, and then multiply the point values by the percentage associated with each component.

Because the vendor demonstrations require a major commitment of time and personnel for both the requesting agency and the vendors, a two-phase process for the evaluations is recommended. Phase 1 would consist of the first three components listed above. Once the agency has evaluated the written proposals, the vendor self-reported ability to meet the functional requirements, and the cost of the solution, two or three vendor finalists can be chosen to move to the next phase of on-site demonstrations and in-depth reference checks.

Before detailing the scoring methods and tools for each section, the overall, end-result scoring might look like what is shown in Tables 2–4.

Table 2
Phase 1 Scoring Matrix

Phase 1												
Vendor	5-year Cost of Ownership	% of Cost Points	Normalized Cost Points	20% of Cost Points	Appendix 1 Raw Score	Normalized Appendix 1 Score	25% of Appendix 1 Points	Written RFP Raw Score	Normalized Raw Score	15% of Written Points	Total Cost & Technical Evaluation Points Awarded	Vendor Finalists Rank Order
Vendor 1	N/A	0.00%	0	0	318	550	138	23	74	11	149	6
Vendor 2	\$1,038,600	92.08%	921	184	479	829	207	242	767	115	506	4
Vendor 3	\$987,593	96.83%	968	194	577	1000	250	315	1000	150	594	1
Vendor 4	\$5,703,825	16.77%	168	34	485	841	210	283	898	135	379	5
Vendor 5	\$1,129,789	84.65%	846	169	559	968	242	303	960	144	555	2
Vendor 6	\$956,335	100.00%	1000	200	521	903	226	249	788	118	544	3

Table 3
Phase 2 Scoring Matrix

Phase 2								
Vendor	Demo Raw Score	Normalized Demo Score	35% of Demo Points	Reference Check Score	Normalized Reference Check Score	5% of Reference Points	Total Points	Final Rank
Vendor 1								
Vendor 2								
Vendor 3	578	767	268	95	969	48	911	2
Vendor 4								
Vendor 5	754	1000	350	98	1000	50	955	1
Vendor 6	455	603	211	93	949	47	803	3

Table 4
Total RFP Evaluation Scoring Matrix

Phase 1												
Vendor	5-year Cost of Ownership	% of Cost Points	Normalized Cost Points	20% of Cost Points	Appendix 1 Raw Score	Normalized Appendix 1 Score	25% of Appendix 1 Points	Written RFP Raw Score	Normalized Raw Score	15% of Written Points	Total Cost & Technical Evaluation Points Awarded	Vendor Finalists Rank Order
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In the example, all components are normalized to 1,000 points and each vendor's score is computed as described above. The major component scores are highlighted in yellow. In this case, the top three vendors, based on the cost, response to functional requirements, and written proposal, were selected to move on to the second phase. The scores for the vendor demonstrations and reference checks were added to the previous scores to get a total point summary and vendor rank.

Following is a more detailed explanation of each major component and the tools and methods to compute the score for each vendor.

Phase 1

Written Proposal Evaluation

The process to review, analyze and evaluate a written proposal is an important and time-consuming task. The RFP itself should have a clearly defined section that outlines what the agency wants the vendors to provide in their proposals and be specific on the order in which their responses should be structured. This orderly and controlled structure will aid the evaluation team as it reviews the materials from each proposal.

An evaluator's guide should be developed to mirror the structure of what is being asked for in the written proposals and include guiding questions. Each major section can be organized into smaller components and weighted as desired. It is not required that all members of the evaluation team read every section of the proposal. For example, if there are members of the core evaluation team who are not comfortable with the technical aspects of the RFP, they can skip the technical sections and allow those more qualified to evaluate those sections.

Table 5 gives a sample of part of a guide that shows a section with questions that match what is asked in the RFP.

Table 5
Evaluator's Guide

Rubric	Question Addressed ✓	Response Quality L-M-H	Comments	Score 0–10
Narrative Response to Functional Requirements (Section 3.2) (50 points)				
Standards and Curriculum – 10 points				
• Does the proposal provide information on how it will support multiple sets and structures of standards such as the CCSS and NJCCCS?				
• Does the proposal describe how it will support the NJ Model Curriculum?				
• Are workflow processes for submittal and approval of curriculum materials based on roles and permissions included?				
• Does the proposal describe how additional educational and professional development teaching resources outside the system may be managed and aligned to standards and SLOs?				
• Does the proposal provide a best practice model curriculum environment that is well vetted and mapped to the existing CCSS and NJCCCS?				
Instructional Design and Practice – 10 points				
• Does the proposal include a module for lesson plan development, storage, and delivery?				
• Is the ability to provide differentiated instruction described?				
• Does the proposal include the ability for teachers to group students by type of instruction required, district, school, classroom, teacher, grade, standard, and SLO?				
• Does the proposal support the assignment of metadata tags to educational materials to allow for standardized searches?				

A guide allows evaluators to take notes as they read each section of the RFP responses. A rubric is designed to be used to enter a score, in this example 0–10, for each of the subsections of the response. Evaluators may want to read all of the vendor responses before going back and entering scores based on the quality of the response.

A custom rubric for every section and question in the guide is not required because a generic rubric can be created and used for all sections. Even though a score of 0–10 is allowed in the example evaluator's guide, the score may be based on a number of generic factors such as:

- Have all the questions been answered completely?
- Is the quality of the response high (depending on reviewer's expectation)?
- Did the proposer provide additional detail to further clarify the answer?
- Did the proposer demonstrate a thorough understanding of the questions?

Reviewers might also want to include notes for each section to help them justify the score they give for the section. Some procurement policies require all evaluation tools and templates, including notes, be publicly documented and available for review following the vendor selection. Reviewers should use care in any remarks collected on this evaluation form.

The scores from all evaluators can then be put into a written evaluation summary to determine the point total for each vendor for the written response component. All evaluators' scores for each component can be averaged and multiplied by the topic weight to give the total points for each subsection. Table 6 shows an example of a section of the written RFP evaluation summary.

Table 6
Written RFP Evaluation Summary

Vendor Written RFP - 300 points total	Vendor 1 Name	Vendor 2 Name	Vendor 3 Name
Narrative Response to Functional Requirements - 50 points			
Standards and Curriculum	10	9	8
Instructional Design and Practice	9	9	8
Assessment and Growth	3	8	10
Data Analysis and Reporting	8	10	6
User Interface	8	9	2
Total	38	45	34
Narrative Response to Technical Requirements – 70 points			
Physical Structure and Location	5	4.5	4
Data Ownership	4	3	3
Technical Contractor Partnering	5	5	4
Security Strategy	5	2	4
Backup and Recovery	3	2	3
Single Sign-on	5	2	4
Client Architecture	5	4.5	4
Availability and Reliability	9	7	8
Accessibility and Usability	4	3	2
Proposed Approach to Enhancements and Customizations	4	4	4
Transition and Integration Strategy	5	5	2
Software Support and Maintenance	5	4	4
Customer Call Center (Help Desk) Management	5	4	4
Total	64	50	50

Each vendor's points would be totaled and entered into the appropriate column on the RFP evaluation scoring spreadsheet, as shown in Table 2.

Functional Requirements Evaluation

The second component of the first phase of evaluation is the vendor's responses to the functional requirements of the RFP. Normally, there are hundreds of these requirements subdivided into the major areas that the proposed solution is to address. Because there are too many of these discrete requirements to evaluate individually, this portion of the proposal becomes more of a self-reporting evaluation by the vendor of their products' ability to meet each requirement.

To foster accurate reporting by the vendors, two things should be made clear: each requirement response will become part of the contract of the successful vendor and the vendor must stipulate the extent to which it meets the requirement. The "extent" responses should be clearly identified in the RFP documents as to what responses are valid. For example, a set of valid responses to each functional requirement might be as shown in Table 7.

Table 7
Functional Requirement Response

Response	Definition
Y—Yes	Requirement will be met. This application requirement is met by proposed software that is installed and operational at other sites and can be demonstrated to the district.
N—No	Requirement will not be provided.
C1—Customization	<p>Requirement will be met by customizing existing software or through the use of software tools such as application report writer or query, at no cost to the State education agency or local education agency.</p> <p>Note: In the Comments column next to this response, you must indicate the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of customization • Estimated level of complexity (High, Medium, Low) • Target date for completion
C2—Customization	<p>Requirement will be met by customizing existing software for an additional cost to the district.</p> <p>Note: In the Comments column next to this response, you must indicate the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of customization • Estimated level of complexity (High, Medium, Low) • Target date for completion • Estimated associated costs (must also be included in the RFP Costs Forms)
UD—Under Development	Requirement will be met by packaged software that is currently under development, in beta test or not yet released. Please indicate target date for completion.
3—Supplied by Third Party	<p>Requirement will be met by third-party software package and is included at no additional cost in this proposal.</p> <p>Note: In the Comments column, indicate the name of the proposed third-party software package and indicate the interface/integration services being proposed.</p>

A value can be assigned to each of the response codes to indicate the percentage of credit to be given for each requirement. For example, Table 8 shows what the weight for the vendor's responses in the example might be:

Table 8
Response Code Values

Code	Weight
Y	1.0
N	0.0
C1	0.8
C2	0.2
UD	0.6
3	1.0

This percentage can then be multiplied by the weight of each requirement determined by the agency. An example of such a result is shown in Table 9

Table 9
Sample Functional Requirements Evaluation

Section 1	Weighted Score	Vendor 1		Vendor 2		Vendor 3	
		Code	Score	Code	Score	Code	Score
System utilizes multiple sets of standards with differing structures, hierarchy, and terminology (e.g. Common Core, career/vocational tech, state, district, content standards, ELP standards, etc.)	4.0	Yes	4	C2	0.8	UD	2.4
Allows for variability in structures among different sets of standards (e.g. content area, level, strand, standard, topic, SLO, benchmark)	5.0	C1	4	Yes	5	Yes	5
Provides for the definition and customization of standards terminology (e.g. redefine strand to another term)	3.0	No	0	3	3	Yes	3
User with the appropriate rights will have the ability to import fully developed database of existing standards	5.0	Yes	5	Yes	5	UD	3
Ability to manage multiple levels of content standards (i.e. content area, level, strand, standard, topic, SLO, benchmark, cumulative progress indicator)	4.0	Yes	4	Yes	4	Yes	4

While the color coding of the example spreadsheet can indicate at a glance the function most covered by the vendor's product, each major section of the functional requirements may also have a relative weight in determining the total points for this component. The total score for each of the functional requirements then is also entered into the Appendix 1 Raw Score column on the RFP evaluation scoring spreadsheet, as shown in Table 2.

Cost

One of the hardest areas to structure in order to compare “apples to apples” is the cost section. Each vendor may have a different approach, pricing scheme or volume discount incentives. Models for solutions deployment continue to evolve to include hosted solutions and software-as-a-service beyond the traditional, agency-hosted solutions. The cost forms must clearly identify any one-time license fees or ongoing maintenance costs. If possible, the forms should be designed in a modular fashion by asking the vendor to provide discrete pricing for each module of the proposal. This will allow unbundling of the proposed solution if it is in the best interest of the State education agency (SEA) or local education agency (LEA).

Set up, implementation, training, support/maintenance and upgrades should all be components of the cost proposal.

A single calculated cost for each vendor will be required to compare that vendor to the others. It is suggested that the agency compare 5- or 10-year cost of ownership for this purpose. Once that cost is determined for each vendor, the same algorithm that is used to give prorated cost points should be followed and the figures entered into the appropriate column on the RFP evaluation scoring spreadsheet, as shown previously in Table 2.

Vendor Finalists Selection

Once the three components of Phase 1 have been evaluated, the numbers are entered into the summary spreadsheet and the top two or three vendors can be selected to move on to Phase 2. At this point, the summary sheet in Table 2 would appear as shown in Table 10.

Table 10
Phase 1 Evaluation Results

Phase 1												
Vendor	5-year Cost of Ownership	% of Cost Points	Normalized Cost Points	20% of Cost Points	Appendix 1 Raw Score	Normalized Appendix 1 Score	25% of Appendix 1 Points	Written RFP Raw Score	Normalized Raw Score	15% of Written Points	Total Cost & Technical Evaluation Points Awarded	Vendor Finalists Rank Order
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Phase 2 Vendor Demonstrations

Vendor demonstrations are the most important aspect of the evaluation process and give the SEA or LEA an opportunity to see how the vendor solution meets the critical components of the RFP. To accomplish this, a demonstration script should be developed with input from the subject matter experts in each component of the RFP. Vendors should be asked as much as possible to demonstrate, rather than describe, how the solution would be used in the agency to accomplish the desired objectives. The development of the script eliminates the “dog and pony show” that some vendors may want to provide. This ensures that they will address the real needs of the agency rather than focusing on “bells and whistles.”

The agenda should be created by working with all stakeholders to determine the amount of time required to adequately evaluate the concerns of each component. It is not necessary that all evaluators attend all components of the demonstrations but, if they are to evaluate a section of the demonstration, they must attend and evaluate that section for all vendors. The agenda should be structured to be as unobtrusive as possible into the normal duties of the evaluators. For example, the SEA and/or LEA business and technical components could be addressed on one day and the second day devoted to the use of the system by principals, teachers, parents and students.

Reference Checks

The second component of Phase 2 of the evaluation is reference checking. Typically, vendors are asked in the RFP to provide a list of 3–5 references of size, complexity, and purpose similar to those of the requesting SEA or LEA. One strategy for reference checks is to send a short questionnaire to be completed by the contact person at each reference site. That person would answer the questions and email them back to the team at the agency, who would then schedule a follow-up teleconference.

For the questionnaire, two or three questions should be developed for a number of implementation areas.

These areas could include:

- Background (scope of work, modules purchased, length of use)
- Quality of Planning (agency and vendor planning process)
- Stakeholder Communications (process, vendor participation, effectiveness)
- Execution of Overall Plan (vendor execution, issue resolution, agency advice)
- Training Plan (type of training, extent of training, agency recommendations)
- Project Benchmarks and Timeline (adherence, lessons learned)
- Adherence to Budget (any cost overruns, required agency personnel, total cost of ownership)
- Customer Support (vendor responsiveness, type of support, hours of operation)
- System Performance (performance issues, software deficiencies, concerns)
- Overall Satisfaction (agency level, school level, individual level)

To provide both quantitative and qualitative data from the reference checks, each of the implementation areas could be given a score. One suggested rubric would be:

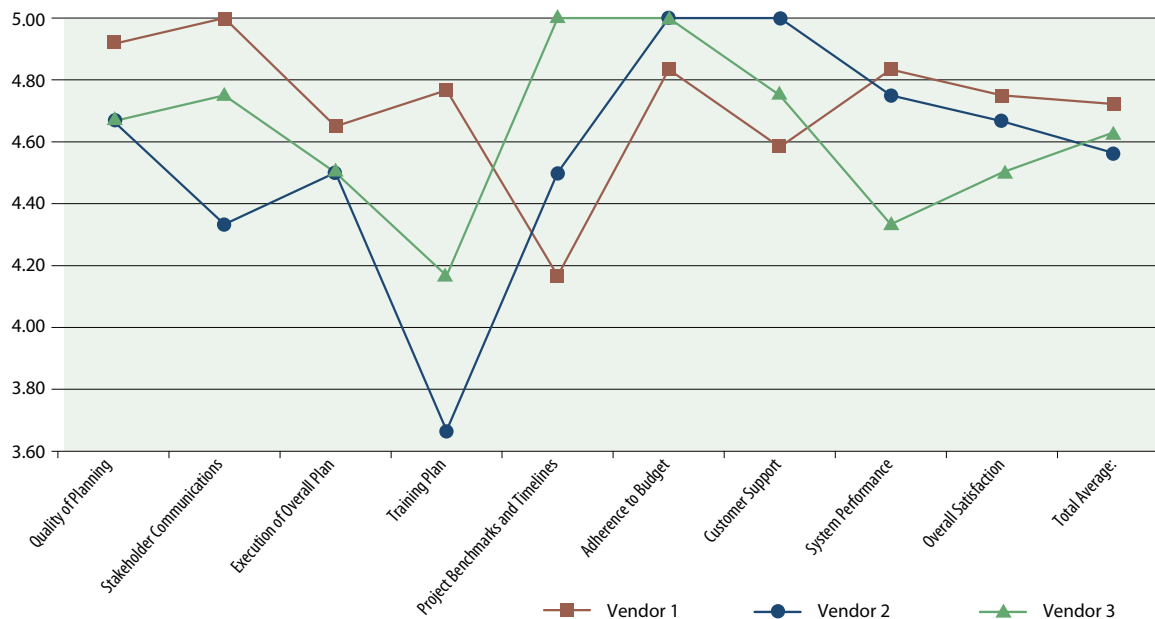
- 5 – Excellent
- 4 – Very Good
- 3 – Average
- 2 – Fair
- 1 – Poor

The quantitative data can then be entered into a spreadsheet and the results displayed in multiple formats. Two formats are shown in Table 11 and Figure 1.

Table 11
Vendor Reference Check Results

Area of Evaluation	Vendor 1	Vendor 2	Vendor 3
Quality of Planning	4.92	4.67	4.67
Stakeholder Communications	5.00	4.33	4.75
Execution of Overall Plan	4.65	4.50	4.50
Training Plan	4.77	3.67	4.17
Project Benchmarks and Timelines	4.17	4.50	5.00
Adherence to Budget	4.83	5.00	5.00
Customer Support	4.58	5.00	4.75
System Performance	4.83	4.75	4.33
Overall Satisfaction	4.75	4.67	4.50
Total Average:	4.72	4.56	4.63

Figure 1
Reference Check Graph



Vendor Finalist Selection

As described in each section of Phase 1, each vendor's points for the two Phase 2 sections would be totaled and entered into the appropriate column on the RFP evaluation scoring spreadsheet, as shown previously in Table 2 and in Table 12.

Table 12
Evaluation Scoring for Phases 1 and 2

Phase 1												
Vendor	5-year Cost of Ownership	% of Cost Points	Normalized Cost Points	20% of Cost Points	Appendix 1 Raw Score	Normalized Appendix 1 Score	25% of Appendix 1 Points	Written RFP Raw Score	Normalized Raw Score	15% of Written Points	Total Cost & Technical Evaluation Points Awarded	Vendor Finalists Rank Order
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These results clearly indicate that Vendor 5 is the leading candidate for recommendation by the evaluation committee to the agency leadership.

As a final validation and documentation, it is suggested that the members of the evaluation team sign off on the recommendation. A sample of a signoff form is provided in Table 13.

Table 13
Committee Signoff Sheet

As a member of the RFP proposal review team and/or the vendor demonstration evaluation team, I support the decision of the [application] selection committee to award the bid to the vendor circled below:

Vendor 1 Name	Vendor 2 Team (check all that apply)	Vendor 3 Department/Position
	<input type="checkbox"/> RFP review team <input type="checkbox"/> Demo evaluation team	
	<input type="checkbox"/> RFP review team <input type="checkbox"/> Demo evaluation team	
	<input type="checkbox"/> RFP review team <input type="checkbox"/> Demo evaluation team	
	<input type="checkbox"/> RFP review team <input type="checkbox"/> Demo evaluation team	
	<input type="checkbox"/> RFP review team <input type="checkbox"/> Demo evaluation team	

Evaluation Timeline

The RFP evaluation process typically takes 10–12 weeks depending on the complexity of the application, the number of participants and the procurement policies and practices of the agency. An estimated schedule from vendor submission of proposals to contract signing is typically included in the RFP. The vendor negotiations stage is difficult to estimate and may take much longer than anticipated. A sample timeline and milestones based on the due date of the proposals are outlined in Table 14.

Table 14
Evaluation Timeline

Milestone	Date
Proposals submitted to organization	Proposal Due Date
Evaluation of written proposals	+2 weeks
Selection of vendor finalist(s)	+1 week
(Vendor finalists prepare for demonstrations) Vendor reference checks by agency	+2 weeks
Vendor finalist(s) demonstrations	+2 weeks
Vendor selection	+1 week
Vendor contract negotiations	+3–4 weeks
Work begins	+2 weeks

In the example outlined in Table 14, Phase 1 of the evaluation process takes about three weeks from proposal submission. Once two to three vendors are chosen as finalists to move to Phase 2, the agency can begin conducting the reference checks during the same time that the vendors are preparing for their demonstrations. Therefore, the demonstration script must be ready to be distributed to the vendors soon after the submission date. Vendor demonstrations normally can take place within a two-week window depending on the number of vendors and the length of the demonstrations. An additional week is built into the schedule to allow the evaluation team to consolidate all of the information from the components of both phases and come to a consensus on the vendor they choose to recommend to the agency's leadership. Three to four weeks are then reserved for contract negotiations. Finally, although a work start date is anticipated by both the vendor and agency, two weeks are normally needed to schedule and prepare for the project kickoff.

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