

# Education Grant Application Narrative

*For proprietary reasons, identification of the funding agency has been masked.*

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## **Organization Description** (mission, key programs, and recent achievements)

Founded in 2017 as a pilot project that built upon support by the Boston Foundation, RELATE (Realizing Educational Leadership and Teaching Excellence) has now blossomed into a robust program that has transformed the educational climate of three Boston-area schools. RELATE, in part, is based on research that proves teachers who trust and collaborate with one another have a greater impact on student achievement than teachers who attain higher levels of education or other forms of professional capital.

The RELATE model provides a safe space for teachers to meet bi-weekly and build trust with one another. This positive cycle leads to markedly increased collaboration between teachers, especially veterans and newcomers; it reduces teacher isolation, burnout, and fear of judgment. This trust network ultimately guides teachers to cultivate more harmonious classroom climates.

The program currently enjoys the support of a diverse body of teachers and administrators in three Boston-area schools. All three schools-Boston Adult Technical Academy (BATA), and alternative public high school, Bridge Boston Charter School (a public charter school, K-8), and the Epiphany School (a private charter school, K-8)-enroll students from underrepresented groups.

During the past two years, our program experienced increasing rates of voluntary teacher participation, reaching nearly 100% in BATA and approximately 80 teachers working together in 9 groups overall.

Beyond transforming the experience of teachers and their classrooms, the program also alters a school's entire atmosphere. As principal Benjamin Helfat observed in recently published remarks, "I am seeing a new school culture take root. Teachers in the group take more initiative and have become leaders in the [school] community. It is clear that this program has improved our school culture." (See Benjamin Helfat, "Improving School Culture through Teacher Groups," *Principal Leadership*, NASSP, April 2019.)

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## Organization Demographics

RELATE currently serves three schools for high-risk students in the Boston area: Boston Adult Technical Academy (BATA), an alternative public high school, Bridge Boston Charter School (a public charter school, K-8), and The Epiphany School. RELATE's teacher participants reflect the diversity of our school system. Approximately 50% are immigrants or persons of color, which has enriched our program greatly. More specifically, 7 of the 9 teachers who have been mentored to lead RELATE groups are persons of color. Nearly all students enrolled in our participating schools are from minority groups.

Accordingly, teachers participating in RELATE serve student populations that are more diverse and disadvantaged than in the larger Boston metropolitan area. The tools that teachers acquire in RELATE benefit all classrooms. However, when a high proportion of students have behavioral challenges, it is critical for teachers to be able to establish classroom norms and build a harmonious environment. This is one reason why teachers in participating schools have found RELATE groups so helpful.

Bridge Boston Charter Elementary School enrolls disadvantaged students: 20% have been homeless, 20% have received support from the Department of Children and Families, 22% receive Special Education services, 43% are English Language Learners. The Epiphany School serves students who are economically disadvantaged from Boston neighborhoods. Finally, BATA draws many students from communities of color and immigrant families who are English-language learners. As BATA describes their mission, "We seek to eliminate school-based barriers to success that often limit the choices and opportunities for all students."

Scholarly studies have found that teachers are in need of, and benefit from, meeting in collegial group settings to share and explore professional and personal ideas, issues and feelings. Helping teachers learn how to establish such mutually respectful and supportive communities in their classrooms and schools benefits their students and the wider community.

One teacher's story:

"Without the mentorship group, I would not have survived at Bridge Boston Charter School—my first experience in urban education. I was ill-prepared for the struggles disadvantaged students brought with them.

"The mentor group morphed into a perfect support group that helped me start making progress in my classroom. Adam facilitated the discussions when needed, but he mostly just let the discussions occur naturally. My kids were fighting, screaming, and threatening each other.

“A group of a veteran and new teachers was just the right mix. The veteran teachers gave me wonderful advice on how to use my resources and told me what those resources were. In the new teacher training, there is never enough time to go over all of the resources available to teachers, but that information is vital. Without my mentor group, I don’t know when I would have learned the ‘tricks of the trade.’ Due to my mentor group, I was finally feeling calmer and back in control of my teaching.

“I am now at the end of the school year with BBCS. My classes are going well and students are making academic progress. With teachers playing a critical role in student achievement, it is so important to pay attention to how both new and experienced teachers are trained and supported. I would not have remained at BBCS without the mentor group and my students would not have had the science teacher they needed to help them make progress towards the MA Frameworks.”

In addition to raising levels of trust and solutions-oriented discussions within their groups, many teachers report an increase in their ability to appreciate diverse perspectives. Once trust has been established, group members delve into needed conversations about race, class, and gender.

As RELATE expands, we are committed to replicating the program in urban schools that reflect high levels of diversity.

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## **Narrative**

### **Context Setting**

RELATE addresses three central problems in schools: insufficient trust within the school community, classroom climates that don’t support student growth, and teacher isolation and burnout.

While RELATE may appear to be a teacher development program, we actually aim to transform classroom climate with the greatest impact on students as they gain the experience of belonging to a supportive community. Teachers model and nurture prosocial attitudes and behaviors in the classroom. As a result, students feel safer and achieve more.

As confirmed by Carrie R. Leana, “The Missing Link in School Reform,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2011: pp. 30-35 (<https://bit.ly/38tL5pC>), students achieve higher gains in academic performance when their teachers have frequent conversations with their peers and when there is high degree of trust or closeness

among teachers. Indeed, this factor correlates with improved student achievement more than other factors such as teacher credentials or subject knowledge. As Leana states (p. 35), “The current focus on building teacher human capital—and the paper credentials often associated with it—will not yield the qualified teaching staff so desperately needed in urban districts. Instead, policymakers must also invest in measures that enhance collaboration and information sharing among teachers. . . . Our research suggests that talking to peers about the complex task of instructing students is an integral part of every teacher’s job and results in rising student achievement.”

More recently, Andrew Hargreaves and Michael Fullen in “The Power of Professional Capital,” *International Trends*, June 2013, Vol. 34 No. 3: pp. 36-39 (<https://bit.ly/2RH6WCY>), confirm the importance of teacher collaboration for reforming education.

Trust, a key ingredient, enables school reform. The implementation of new school programs breaks down often since tension exists between teachers and administrators. RELATE addresses this issue by supporting teachers to strengthen their peer community, thereby improving communication within schools.

RELATE trains teachers to lead well by having them participate in well-led groups. They experience what works. We know of no other program that provides this opportunity.

Parallels between RELATE groups and classes inevitably arise since all groups fundamentally resemble each other in important ways. Mentored group leaders point out these parallels and demonstrate and explain effective strategies to address problems. In a supportive atmosphere, teachers learn from one another.

**Project Description** (349/400 words): What part of challenge do you address? Activities? For general operating support, provide overview of what you plan to achieve with this grant during the year.

Groups of 8-12 teachers meet bi-weekly to discuss their work. School principals recruit teachers to participate voluntarily in the program. Senior educators are similarly invited to become group leaders as mentored by an outside expert in group dynamics.

Teacher groups are encouraged to discuss any aspect of their job that they find important. We promise teachers that the content of these discussions will not be shared with people outside the group, and that they are not being evaluated.

The teacher groups have two objectives, which are explained at the start of the year: (1) to provide an opportunity to discuss their work with their peers, and (2) to learn how to lead groups effectively. Groups are given freedom to set up norms and structures they find helpful. Teachers are excited to discuss challenging aspects of their work and are grateful for the chance to reflect deeply on their practice.

We focus closely on developing the leadership skills of educators who are also group co-leaders. Co-leaders from all participating schools meet three times a year for workshops covering basic principles of group leadership. They also meet throughout the year with each other and the outside expert to discuss their groups' development. We are thus creating within each school a community of experienced group leaders who can advise their colleagues in and out of their groups.

Teacher-participants develop their own leadership skills via this positive cycle: (1) Members participate in their group's discussions and gain the experience of belonging to a well-led group and observing expert leaders. (2) Group leaders point out parallels between events in the group and classroom situations, encouraging teachers to apply lessons learned to their classroom groups. (3) Teachers try new ideas in their classrooms and return to their RELATE group to discuss the experience and restart the cycle.

## **Impact (**

RELATE has been designed with sustainability as a core feature. The program has been structured so that each participating school feels strongly that this is their program, and not the property of an outside agency.

Some individual-level outcomes demonstrate successful impact. We intend to measure, for instance, teacher retention rates as well as data on student suspensions and other disciplinary actions. The latter will provide important information about possible improvement in classroom climate.

Ideally, the use of an expert mentor lasts only until the school staff is able to run the program on their own. We are planning to create a steering committee for RELATE at our participating high school to manage the program there; over 80% of the staff participates in RELATE groups, which has profoundly affected the school climate. These effects will continue to be felt in the absence of the outside expert mentor.

By giving each school and each group the freedom to implement the program in the way they see fit, we have increased the sense of ownership educators feel. Our core goals can be achieved in multiple ways, and we learn more each year about new ways in which these groups can succeed. As schools create their own ways to achieve the program's basic goals, they feel more deeply invested in the project.

By collecting data on our work, presenting at regional and national conferences, and encouraging researchers to study our work and publicize their findings, we hope to change educators' views on the importance of groups in schools.

## **Other Information**

In RELATE's first two years, teachers collaborated across departments and veteran teachers helped first-year teachers feel accepted and gain insights into managing their classrooms. Improving classroom atmosphere can prove difficult since many students lack an ability to express themselves constructively.

Classroom climate directly impacts student success since students come to school with a powerful need to fit in socially. Teachers, who create a strong classroom culture that links social acceptance to learning, foster students' academic and personal growth. RELATE builds on the crucial, overlooked fact that classes are groups that operate within the framework of group dynamics.

As one teacher illustrates the point,

"It was the 3rd teaching assistant this year that left our classroom. Feeling frustrated, about these circumstances, I brought it up in our teacher group. I noticed my students' behavior changed drastically with new or different adults.

"I was concerned about the transition to yet another new face and feared the effects of this inconsistency. Mirroring the work we do in our teacher group, I sat my students down in a circle to hold a family meeting. I reached out to my own group co-facilitator to help me prepare a discussion structure for this class conversation similar to our group.

"Slowly, the conversation started to flow. Students were making connections with each other, not feeling alone, and knowing that what they were feeling is okay. The conversation revealed powerful insight into my kids' hearts. I came to realize they were not frustrated by new teachers, but by how the class felt when a new teacher came. They were frustrated with their friends for making the class community feel different and they talked about why it changed. Students worked on how they can support each other so that no matter who comes in things always feel calm and safe.

"Following this conversation, I have seen a change in the class family in a positive way. The transition to a new teaching assistant has gone much smoother than previously. We continue to have family meetings in the style that was born of my collaboration with our teacher group."