**FY2025**

**FC 0350 Playful Learning Institute (competitive)**

**Questions and Answers**

Please email questions to [achievement@mass.gov](mailto:achievement@mass.gov) with the

Subject Line: FY2025 FC 0350 Question

*Questions and responses will be posted here and updated periodically until the grant due date.*

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# Questions through 11/15/2024:

1. **Question:** Will the slides be shared after the [Bidders Conference]?

**Question:** Will you email the power point for us to share with others unable to attend the meetings today.

***Answer***: The Bidders Conference slide deck will be linked in GEM$ and on the [PLI website](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/pli.html).

1. **Question**: How big should the team be?

***Answer***: PLI teams must include 2 educators at each grade level PreK-3 and one building administrator for each school building participating in the PLI as well as a district administrator. It is this core team that will participate in professional development and coaching.

The district can include additional team members to participate in professional development including but not limited to: community-based early childhood and out-of-school time providers, instructional assistants, special education/inclusion specialists, specialists working with multi-lingual learners; district/school coaches working with PLI participating classroom educators, etc.

1. **Question:** Will the 5 teams currently involved in Playful Learning need to apply for this grant or are you looking for 8 new sites?

***Answer***: DESE is seeking 8 new sites. Districts that participated in the pilot of the Playful Learning Institute are eligible to apply to bring on new educators within the participating school or to bring on a team of educators from a new school.

1. **Question**: What commitment is expected from the district beyond the 18 months? Are there any financial commitments that would be expected from the district?

***Answer***: No financial commitment/matching is expected from districts beyond the 18 months. The funds for awarded districts are intended to cover grant related costs, including professional development, coaching, evaluation and supplies and materials.

1. **Question**: Is there a requirement to adopt a particular curriculum program in order to implement the playful learning strategies?

***Answer***: No, coaches will support educators to embed playful learning strategies into already existing curricular programs being implemented at each grade level.

1. **Question:** Can you expanded on language in the RFP that states, “Districts must consult with eligible private schools in their community and complete the Private Schools Consultation form (found in the Related Documents Section of the grant in GEM$. Additional resources can be found at DESE's [Private School Equitable Services under ESSA webpage](https://www.doe.mass.edu/federalgrants/resources/equitableservices-essa/).”

***Answer***: An eligible LEA applying for a Stronger Connections subgrant (e.g., Fund Code 0350 – Playful Learning Institute, PK-3) must consult with appropriate private school officials before the entity makes any decision that affects the opportunities of eligible private school children and educators to participate (ESEA section 8501(c)(3)). Such consultation might include a brief survey of non-public schools or other information gathering to indicate the schools’ interest in participating and the population to be served. Such consultation will allow the LEA to consider the needs of all students and educators—both public and private—in developing its application, and to include the projected costs for equitable services in the application.

1. **Question**: For the private school consultation, does the school also have to serve PK-3?

***Answer***: Given that the focus of the Playful Learning Institute is PK through 3rd grade, private school consultation would ideally include private schools in the district’s geographic boundaries that include those grades.

# PLI School Team Questions

1. **Question**: Is the school team required to have all 5 grade levels?

***Answer***: DESE will prioritize districts who apply with teams that include educators from PreK through 3rd educators.

1. **Question**: Just to confirm, is including PK a requirement or could there be an option for just k through 3?

***Answer***: DESE will prioritize districts that apply with teams in PreK-3.

1. **Question**: Can we target only PK and the team be Admin, teachers, community based PK and local childcare providers?

***Answer***: DESE will prioritize districts who apply with teams that include educators from PreK through 3rd educators.

1. **Question**: Similarly, are we required to have Pre-K through grade 3, or could we write for one school that happens to be Pre-K through1?

***Answer***: DESE will prioritize districts who apply with teams in PreK-3. If a school team is interested in the Playful Learning Institute and covers grades Pre-K through 1st, the district is encouraged to pair the school with an elementary school that includes interested 2nd and 3rd grade educators.

1. **Question**: Can District Coaches be part of the team?

***Answer***: District coaches can join the asynchronous and in-person professional development opportunities.

1. **Question**: In rural districts can we apply for only some grades and not all PK-3 if they aren’t all in the same building?

***Answer***: Districts with low enrollment in a particular grade or grades that results in only one classroom per grade level or a multi-age classroom, can submit an application with a team that reflects on one classroom per grade or one multi-age classroom covering multiple grades.

If the district has at least two educators in each grade but they are located in different school buildings, the application can include a PK-3 team that includes multiple buildings. Note: in this model, the principal of any building where educators are included on the team must be on the team as well.

# GEM$ QUESTIONS:

1. **Question**: I was looking at the Fund Code 0350 grant this weekend, but I do not see where the actual application for this grant can be found. Am I missing something? Can you share the link for it?

***Answer***: As stated in the RFP, the competitive grant **will be submitted in DESE’s new GEM$ system.** GEM$ is a cloud-based fiscal and program management grant system that will eventually phase out the use of EdGrants. Please see the Submission Instructions section in the RFP for more information. The link is: [Grants for Education Management System (GEM$).](https://mass.egrantsmanagement.com/)

To find the application in GEM$, users can click on **Funding 🡪 Funding Applications** and then look for FC 0350 under the Competitive Applications header.

An [Application Planning Template](https://mass.egrantsmanagement.com/DocumentLibrary/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentGuid=831a6442-7a4c-44d8-9d71-cbde9eb2214f&inline=true) is available to support applicants in preparing the program narrative / required program information section of the application.

1. **Question**: I cannot find the new application for the grant on the GEM$ grant website. Would this be because we must submit the access request form prior to being able to view this application? Or is it possible I am on the wrong site?

***Answer***:GEM$ is the correct site to apply for this grant. To find the application in GEM$, users can click on **Funding 🡪 Funding Applications** and then look for FC 0350 under the Competitive Applications header.

In order to submit an application, at least one user must be assigned the role of **LEA Grantwriter** for this particular grant application. A district’s **User Access Administrator** can assign this role.



1. **Question**: Will you be able to share a video or guide on how to navigate GEM$?

***Answer:*** [*GEM$ Training Documentation and Recordings*](https://mass.egrantsmanagement.com/DocumentLibrary/PublicLink.aspx?Folder=5)are available on the GEM$ main page in the DESE Resources section.

1. **Question**:Does the grant need to be approved by the LEA Superintendent/Chief Executive?

***Answer***:Yes, competitive grant applications are considered approved and submitted when the grant is moved through the “Superintendent/Chief Executive Approval” step in GEM$. The due date of the grant is December 11, 2024 at 5:00pm in GEM$.

1. **Question**: Are the grants populated in GEM$ for each district? Is there no limit to the narrative for the required program (information) description.

***Answer***:LEA Assigned Users in GEM$ for an organization will see a list of all funding applications for which their organization is eligible by navigating to **Funding 🡪 Funding Applications**.

There is no page limit for the narrative sections in the funding application as this is a web-based grant application platform. Responses should be provided to address each specific question. Please make sure to respond to the question being asked when writing your response.

1. **Question**: We are planning to create an early learning center for next school year that will have PreK for 3 and 4 year olds. Could we apply for this grant in anticipation of that? And, if not, what is the likelihood of another opportunity like this coming up soon?

***Answer***: DESE will prioritize districts who apply with participants from Pre-K to grade 3. If the district knows the teachers whose classrooms will be in the new early learning center and there are at least two educators along with the administrator that will be leading in the building, these individuals could be listed as part of the school team. Additionally, the district would need to consider which school with grades Kindergarten through 3rd grade would also be included on the school team. This grant will run for 18 months.

Pending funding availability and information gleaned from the Playful Learning Institute’s Evaluation, it is the hope that additional cohorts of school teams will be included in future implementation plans.

# Questions through 11/22/2024

1. **Question**: I see that the coaching is designed to be provided directly to 10 teachers across the 5 grade levels.  Some of the classes that we are hoping to have participate if selected for the grant are full inclusion classrooms that have two teachers that work together for the entire day, share the same prep and the same PLC time.  Would this pair of teachers be considered one teacher and share the coaching or would one of them need to be excluded?

Answer: In cases where there is a co-taught classroom, the two educators would be considered one of the grade level classrooms and would receive coaching together.

1. **Question:** After talking with my grade level teams, all classrooms would like to participate.  I know coaching is limited but would all staff in PK-3 be able to participate in asynchronous learning components of the professional development?  If we had a teacher in grade 4 and 5 that were interested, would they be allowed to complete the PD?

Answer: Any teacher in a PLI district can participate in both asynchronous and in-person PD. The PD is tailored for grades PreK-3 but if teachers outside those grade levels wanted to join that is fine.

1. **Question**: Can supply materials be used on furniture/space recreation?

Answer: Grant funds can be used for furniture to the extent that is aligned with the playful learning strategies that are chosen to be implemented and approved by the awarded district’s assigned coach.

1. **Question**: What is the location of the in-person PD (so we can plan for travel costs)

Answer: The location of the PD will be determined once we have identified the school teams that will be participating. We will do our best to identify training locations that are central to the participating teams.

1. **Question**: What is a typical teacher stipend you see, or the amount of hours assigned to the stipend?

Answer: This is a local district decision that each district decides for itself and is often based on negotiated contracts.

1. **Question:** Where can I find out if we meet the criteria: that we have an LEA need index 80 or higher?

Answer: While the high needs eligibility list is linked in the RFP, any district, regardless of whether they meet the high need criteria, is eligible to apply.  There are multiple funding sources supporting the work of the Playful Learning Institute; one has specific eligibility criteria (e.g., high needs index) and the other is universally available to any district. Once the Department has made its recommendations for awards, we will identify which funding source will be used to fund each grant award.

# Questions through 11/24/2024

1. **Question:** Can pre-k from one building apply and a k-3 from another building apply but do I need both principals? Or could Early Childhood Coordinator be the admin for pre-k?

Answer: Yes, the principal from both buildings would need to be a member of the team, and able to participate in both professional development and coaching. The Early Childhood Coordinator could serve as the school leader for the preschool if that person supervises the preschool educators.

1. **Question**: Is the requirement that there be a minimum of 2 teachers per team or is that the maximum? Can we have more than 2?

Answer: The PLI team must have a minimum of 2 teachers per grade level. The district can add more teachers to the team who can participate in professional development (asynchronous and in-person) but would not be guaranteed coaching.

1. **Question**: Can you talk more about how [High Quality Instructional Materials](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/impd/) (HQIM) aligns with the grant?

Answer: The design of the PLI’s Professional Development and Coaching models is to support educators in implementing playful instructional practices within the context of locally selected curriculum materials. While district’s are not required to use a particular curriculum program as part of the PLI, applicants will receive competitive priority if they are using HQIM or have a plan to move to using HQIM.

1. **Question**: What does PD/Coaching look like for this year?

Answer: Professional development will begin in the spring (March) of 2025 with asynchronous learning. The asynchronous materials will take about 10 hours of time and will include chapter readings, podcasts, and review of other resources. Following asynchronous learning, teams will attend a 2-day professional development (either April or June) that will take place from approximately 9:00-3:00 each day. At the end of the 2-day professional development, school teams will have a draft action plan outlining which playful instructional practices they will focus on during the 2025-2026 school year.

Coaches will make initial contact with their teams in the spring and as part of the professional development. In classroom/school coaching will begin at the start of the 2025-2026 school year. The 10 educators on the team will receive 3-5 hours of in-classroom coaching each month and the district and school leaders will receive 1-2 hours of coaching per month.

There will be additional professional development opportunities during the 2025-2026 school year (approximately 5 hours) though dates and times have not yet been determined.

1. **Question**: Can co-taught teachers apply as “one applicant”?

Answer: Yes. If a classroom has a general educator and special educator who co-teach, they will be coached together and will count as one classroom for that grade level. Schools with co-taught classrooms should identify 2 classrooms per grade level, which would be the equivalent of 4 educators at each grade.

1. **Question**: What if we don’t have specific books at Pre-K? Do all classrooms need the same curriculum?

Answer: Applicants do not need the same curricular program at pre-k as the curricular program being implemented in Kindergarten through 3rd grade. If awarded, the coaches will work with the participants at each grade level and help them embed playful learning into what curricular programs are being used.

1. **Question**: Can grant funding be split across multiple buildings?

Answer: Yes, districts can determine how to allocate the grant funds across the participating buildings.

1. **Question**: What should we keep in mind when creating a budget?

Answer: Based on feedback from our pilot school teams, it will be important to budget funds for stipends and substitutes for coaching, debrief sessions, professional development and evaluation. Applicants should also budget for supplies and materials needed for playful learning in the participating classrooms. If awarded, the assigned coach will assist the district in determining what supplies and materials will be needed based on the selected playful learning approaches.

1. **Question**: Do we need to meet all criteria for all the federal funding sources?

Answer: All Massachusetts public school districts, charter public schools and collaboratives are eligible to apply. There are two funding sources supporting the Playful Learning Institute, including one that has high need index criteria. The second funding source is one that can be used with all school districts. DESE will determine which funding source will support the awarded districts.

1. **Question**: Can you speak more about the partnership with community-based organizations?

Answer: Community-based preschool partners can join the professional development and other local planning activities, professional learning activities, etc. However, only the 10 educators within the selected schools will receive the coaching.

1. **Question:** Are we required to submit a budget for Fiscal Year 2025 and Fiscal Year 2026 or should we submit one budget that cuts across both fiscal years.

Answer: Applicants will submit one budget that will run from award (approximately January 2025) through June 30, 2026. There will likely be a period in the summer when DESE will ask grantees to submit information on how much was spent between the award and June 30, 2025 in order to be able to accurately account for spending across both fiscal years.

1. **Question**: Is Boston’s *Focus on Early Learning* curriculum CURATE approved?

Answer: The *Focus on Early Learning* curriculum is not currently CURATE approved but is going through a review process locally.

# Questions through 12/4/2024:

1. **Question**: How large of a scope are you looking to fund? How many buildings per district can apply?

Answer: This grant requests that 10 educators in grades PreK-3 participate (2 at each grade level). In districts where grades are split across buildings (ex. PreK in one building and K-3 in another), it is perfectly acceptable to apply with more than one building of teachers. In this scenario, the building leader from each school must be an active participant on the team.

1. **Question**: Is it okay to have PreK and K-3rd grade at different buildings?

Answer: Yes, districts that have PreK and K-3rd grade at different buildings are eligible to apply. In these cases, the principal from each building represented is required to be on the team.

1. **Question**: Is it okay to have a K teacher from one building and a K teacher from another building?

Answer: For the sake of common planning and community building, we encourage districts to select grade level teachers from the same building when possible. However, we understand that the configurations of school buildings vary from district to district and it isn’t always the case that grades Preschool through 3rd grade will be in the same building. In circumstances where PK-3rd grade classrooms aren’t in the same building, districts can apply with teachers from separate buildings.

Additionally, if the grade levels appear in different buildings, we encourage districts to aim to identify the 2 grade level educators from the same building to make it easier for joint planning within a grade as well as grade level coaching. If the two grade level educators are assigned to different school buildings, the district is encouraged to use the grant application to share the structures that are or will be in place for within-grade and across grade collaboration, including planning and coaching.

1. **Question**: I noticed that the eligibility amount for this grant is $175K. Do I need to list the contracted services for PD/Coaching and Evaluation with the state in the budget under major contractual services? Do I put them in two different line items or 1?

Answer: Districts should include the $80,000 for PD/Coaching and $25,000 for evaluation under major contractual services. In the budget narrative, you can either write generally that the funds are for PD/Coaching ($80,000) and evaluation ($25,000) contracts with a DESE approved vendor or you can list the specific vendors (i.e., Neighborhood Villages for PD/Coaching and NORC for evaluation). Each contract should be entered as a separate entry within this line item.

1. **Question**: Private school consultation: We have 7 private schools. What are the expectations if the private schools want to participate? Are all grades PreK-3 expected to be involved? If there isn’t a PreK can they participate? Would they be required to send ten teachers?

Answer: Private school educators can join the asynchronous and in-person PD along with Professional Learning Communities. Educators from grades PreK-3 are expected to participate but if there isn’t a Pre-K, the private school team should consist of educators from each of the grades Kindergarten through 3rd grade, if possible.

1. **Question**: The RFP notes that the grant duration is 18 months. How do we know how much funding to allocate to materials and supplies prior to meeting with our coach?

Answer: Districts should do their best to allocate funds for supplies and materials when creating their application budget (approximately $3-5K/classroom). Keep in mind DESE can issue an amendment after districts meet with their coach, if a budget update is needed.

1. **Question**: Can I name the DESE approved vendors in my grant application?

Answer: Yes, you can write NORC and Neighborhood Villages into the major contractual services line-item in the budget. Both are on DESE’s state approved vendor list. NORC will be getting 25K per district and Neighborhood Villages will be getting 80K per district.

1. **Question**: Where will the Professional Development (PD) be located in April and June?

Answer: We don’t have a location yet as we want to make the location for the PD is centralized for participating grantee districts.

1. **Question**: Is this an opportunity to look at cross curricular content?

Answer: Yes, playful learning strategies can be embedded into all curriculum across all content areas. These strategies can be woven into the district's existing curricular programs.

1. **Question**: In the grant application, there is a question that asks about the current state of our classrooms. If some of our classrooms aren’t playful yet, can we state that?

Answer: Yes, districts should outline the status of playful learning across the grade levels, including that some or all of the classrooms may not be implementing playful learning yet. For the purpose of coaching, it’s best if coaches know exactly where each awarded district is currently in their implementation of playful learning at each grade level so that they can best meet the needs of each participant.

1. **Question**: How many educators can participate at each grade level? Can we have participants beyond the 10?

Answer: The grant requires a minimum of 2 teachers per grade level (PreK-3); these two educators at each grade level will receive 1:1 coaching. Additional participants beyond the 2 grade level educators can join PD and group coaching but not 1:1 coaching.

1. **Question**: If we invite a community partner, are they part of the coaching?

Answer: The community partner can participate in the PD opportunities but not the 1:1 coaching.

1. **Question**: Do we need to reach out to community partners (preK)?

Answer: Districts can reach out to community partners but it is not a requirement of this grant.

1. **Question**: Is this a train-the-trainer model for the continuation grant?

Answer: Districts can look at grant code PLI 0347 (Continuation Grant) to learn more about areas of coaching that this year’s continuation grantees can prioritize for their year 2 activities. One of the areas in the continuation grant supports PLI participants to mentor new educators.

1. **Question**: Can we add teachers to our application outside of the 10 receiving direct coaching?

Answer: If the district is planning to include more than 10 educators as part of the team and invite them to professional development, please include, if possible, their names and contact information in the grant application so that DESE and Neighborhood Villages can best prepare for PD in the spring.

1. **Question**: Do you have examples of what play can look like in grades 2-3?

Answer: The coaches do an excellent job of easing teachers into implementing 2 playful learning strategies to start at each grade level. Please take a look at our [Playful Learning](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/pli.html) Institute website under the category “Playful Learning Practices Overview (as adapted from Boston Public Schools Early Childhood Department):” There you will find 6 playful learning practices that can be embedded into any grade level PreK-3. The coaches tailor these practices to meet the needs of each individual district and classroom teacher they work with.

We anticipate creating videos moving forward to provide examples of what these playful learning practices look like in implementation at the different grade levels.

1. **Question**: For the team taking part in the PD, is the expectation that the entire team must attend the same 2-day training? We are trying to address the challenge of finding substitutes for all staff and being able to split the team and have some attend in April and others attend in June would be helpful. Also, we would use funds for travel and substitutes. Can remaining funds be used to purchase education materials to implement playful learning?

Answer: The preference is to have the whole team attend the training together as the two days will include team planning time. If this isn’t possible due to substitute shortages, please note in the application that your preference is to split the team between the two trainings and how you’ll ensure that a district or school administrator will attend with each team.

Budget funds can be used for substitutes, stipends, travel costs as well as materials to implement the selected playful learning practices. Awarded districts will work with their coaches to determine which supplies and materials are needed to implement the practices identified by the teams.

1. **Question**: How will the coaching support strategies for designing with cognitive complexity and high expectations in mind? We’re eager to develop "hard fun" strategies that challenge and inspire learners.

Answer: The coaching will be customized to the needs of each school team and each educator on the team. In general, coaching will focus on supporting educators to intentionally design and implement playful learning within the context of high-quality instructional materials that is aligned with our state learning standards, sets high expectations, is developmentally appropriate, student centered and culturally and linguistically responsive. The goal of the professional development and coaching model is to support educators, school and district leaders to create learning environments and opportunities in the early grades that deepen engagement of students in order to build their content knowledge, inspire joy and fun in the learning process and to ensure that all students have agency in their learning.