



**Request for Proposals**

**for**

**Research Services**

**Issued by:**

**GreatSchools**  
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## **PART 1: SYNOPSIS**

### **1.1 Purpose**

The purpose of this request for proposals (RFP) is to solicit proposals from qualified providers for exploratory research utilizing ethnographic methodologies.

GreatSchools is making a major upgrade to the GreatSchools.org interface and technology to provide parents with deeper insight into the quality of schools, enable better matches between families and schools, steer more low-income parents to high-performing schools. GreatSchools is also further developing our Local programs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Washington, DC, as well as launching a new GreatSchools Local program in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The purpose of this project is to assess how parents in our three Local program cities utilize digital media technology (web sites, social networks, email and mobile devices) to make decisions, in particular decisions about schools. Through this research, we hope to determine how we can best leverage our enhanced GreatSchools.org site and intermediary partner organizations in Local program cities to accomplish three goals: provide parents with deeper insight into the quality of schools and enable better matches between families and schools, steer more low-income parents to high-performing schools; and expand GreatSchools Local programs to new cities more rapidly and cost-effectively.

The successful applicant will propose and carry out a research plan that includes ethnographic methodologies, working with GreatSchools' stakeholders, Local program partners, and parent participants.

### **1.2 Deadlines**

December 15, 2011	RFP available to interested respondents
December 22, 2011	Bidders' conference call Q&A (time TBD)
<b>January 6, 2012</b>	<b>RFP proposals due by 5:00 p.m. PDT</b>
January 12-13, 2012	Review process with two finalists
January 18, 2012	Best and final offers due by 5:00 p.m. PDT
January 20, 2012	RFP award date
April 15, 2012	Final report due

### **1.3 Point of contact**

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### **1.4 Funding**

The contract amount will be negotiated based on the proposal(s) selected. Please see Section 3.5 Budget for important details.

## **PART 2: BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **2.1 About GreatSchools**

GreatSchools is a national nonprofit based in San Francisco, CA that leverages digital media technology to help parents get a great education for their children. Our mission is to give children a greater opportunity to succeed in life by inspiring and guiding their parents to be effective champions of education at home and in their communities. We are online at [www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org). We currently have three programs:

1. GreatSchools.org is the leading American K-12 school guide that reaches 37 million unique visitors per year, including 43 percent of American households with children. GreatSchools.org provides information about schools across all three sectors: district, charter and private schools, and to the maximum extent possible, we provide information that is comparable across all three sectors. GreatSchools.org has more than 900,000 school ratings and reviews.

2. College Bound, a digital media program, helps low-income parents guide their children to education success.
3. GreatSchools Local features on-the-ground programs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Washington, DC that help low-income parents choose the right schools for their children. In these cities, GreatSchools publishes a School Chooser guide for parents and collaborates with more than 300 organizations. We have significant partnerships with HUD (DC and Milwaukee), Fight for Children (DC), the Black Alliance for Educational Options (Milwaukee), and the Michael Walton Foundation (DC and Milwaukee). In these and other partnerships, we embed our work within the programming of the partner organizations.

## 2.2 Planned Product Development in 2012

GreatSchools is currently embarking on a set of major improvements and changes to the GreatSchools.org offerings for our Local program cities. The planned improvements are:

- Develop a mobile version of our site nationwide, with an enhanced school matching function for families in Indianapolis, IN; Milwaukee, WI; and Washington, DC.
- Define two new proprietary ratings of a school's academic quality and culture that will be published on the GreatSchools.org web site for schools in the target cities of Milwaukee, WI, Indianapolis, IN, and Washington, DC.
- GreatSchools.org web site will include information for our target cities (Milwaukee, WI, Washington, DC, and Indianapolis, IN) for all of the following:
  - Academic ratings by school
  - School "culture and climate" ratings by school, with photos and videos
  - Neighborhood school boundaries
  - Programs
  - Other indicators of school quality and culture
- GreatSchools will develop a school matching function on GreatSchools.org that guides parents in Milwaukee, WI; Washington, DC; and Indianapolis, IN towards higher-performing schools by helping them to:
  - Understand the range of school options across sectors
  - Evaluate schools using key criteria, primarily academic quality and culture
  - Assess which higher-performing schools meet key family needs
  - Conduct a deeper investigation and do fine-tuned comparisons between schools to further refine the list of matching schools
  - Progress through later stages of the school choice process, from visiting schools to applying

## 2.3 Planned Local Program Development in 2012

By January 2012, the Local Director will establish a framework and targets for establishing a Local program in Indianapolis, Indiana that describes how GreatSchools will manage Chooser production and oversee distribution and define measures of success for the program.

**By April 2012, in Milwaukee, DC, and Indianapolis, GreatSchools will publish an internal ethnographic study of parents in all three cities, across income brackets, focusing on how parents use technology (web sites, social networks, email and mobile devices) to choose schools in order to understand the role of intermediary organizations.**

## 2.4 Program design principles

GreatSchools.org and GreatSchools Local are built on five principles:

1. **Leverage powerful and newly accessible communications technology, including mobile and web-based technology.** The Internet is changing the way people do everything—web platforms are allowing people unprecedented access to data of all kinds—including school data. Additionally, low-income parents are getting online at a rapid rate. As of 2009, 68% of households with children in the 20<sup>th</sup> to 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of household income had broadband Internet access at home (Pew Internet & American Life Center, 2009). By leveraging the power of the internet and

mobile technologies, GreatSchools aims to provide parents nationwide with the information they need to choose good schools for their children, and empower them to get involved in ensuring their children’s scholastic success.

2. **Partner widely with established organizations that reach our target audience.** The best way to build relationships with low-income parents is to partner with organizations they already know and trust. Fortunately, there are thousands of such organizations—including schools, cities, nonprofits, labor unions, companies, and libraries—that would like to be able to assist the parents they serve with helping their children succeed in school. GreatSchools believes in the power of partnerships with organizations in areas with high degrees of school choice; we aim to reach millions of parents by partnering with hundreds of these organizations.
3. **Usefully define school quality for parents**  
School quality is a complex and difficult-to-define concept. In order for parents to choose good schools for their children, they need to know how to assess schools for their academic performance and culture. GreatSchools is acutely aware of the need to provide clear and easy-to-understand definitions of school quality for parents that fit their particular circumstances. Both the content on GreatSchools.org and the services provided by GreatSchools Local are dedicated to helping parents understand school quality in ways that are relevant to them.
4. **Utilize local laboratories to test new ideas**  
Due to the national character of GreatSchools.org, GreatSchools is committed to testing new ideas about how to provide parents with more and better tools and information about schools and school choice. In order to do this, we use our GreatSchools Local sites, cities that have a high degree of school choice, as laboratories to test and learn from new product, content, and design concepts.
5. **Build in research and evaluation from the beginning.** Our long-term goal is to demonstrate that GreatSchools.org and GreatSchools Local improve parents’ school choice processes in ways that ultimately influence student achievement. To accomplish this, we are building research and evaluation into the expansion and change process from the beginning. We wish to establish the link between parents’ participation in GreatSchools.org and GreatSchools local and student achievement.

## 2.5 Evaluation stakeholders

GreatSchools is widely used by parents, educators, policymakers, philanthropists, and journalists. Correspondingly in addition to GreatSchools staff, our stakeholders are made up of these groups: K-12 policymakers, education reform organizations, educators (districts, schools, and teachers), funders, and parents.

## PART 3: PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

Applicants should provide a short narrative that addresses at least the following sections.

### 3.1 Key questions

This research will be exploratory in nature, but there are several key questions that need to be answered:

- How do parents in the three Local program cities think about and utilize digital media technology and why (Including web sites, social networks, email and mobile devices)?
  - How is the perception and use of technology by parents different and similar between these three cities? Why?
  - How is the perception and use of technology by parents different and similar between different types of technology? Why?

- How is the perception and use of technology by parents different and similar between different genders, income groups, ethnicities? Why?
- How do parents in the three Local program cities use digital media technology in/to make decisions and why?
  - How is the use of technology by parents in decision-making different and similar between these three cities? Why?
  - How is the use of technology by parents in decision-making different and similar between different types of technology? Why?
  - How is the use of technology by parents in decision-making different and similar between different genders, income groups, ethnicities? Why?
- How are intermediary organizations involved in parents' usage of digital media technology in these three cities and why?
  - What types of delivery mechanisms are available?
  - How is the involvement of intermediary organizations in parental use of technology different and similar between these three cities? Why?
  - How is the involvement of intermediary organizations in parental use of technology different and similar between different types of technology? Why?
  - How is the involvement of intermediary organizations in parental use of technology different and similar between different genders, income groups, ethnicities? Why?
- How do parents in the three Local program cities choose schools?
  - What data is important to them overall and at each step in the process?
  - Where do they find this data and how do they use it? (Individually? Socially?)
  - What kinds of intermediary organizations/delivery methods are used to acquire different types of information?
  - How do the answers to these questions differ between the three cities?
  - How do the answers to these questions differ by gender, income groups, ethnicities?
- How, if at all, do parents in the three Local program cities utilize digital media technology during the process of choosing schools for their children?
  - If they do, why? If they don't, why not?
  - How is parental usage of technology during the school choice process different and similar between these three cities? Why?
  - How is parental usage of technology during the school choice process different and similar between different types of technology? Why?
  - How is parental usage of technology during the school choice process different and similar between different genders, income groups, ethnicities? Why?
- What types of information do parents in the three Local program cities look for when utilizing digital media technology during the process of choosing schools for their children? Why?
  - How is the information parents in the three Local program cities look for when utilizing technology during the school choice process different and similar between these three cities? Why?
  - How is the information parents in the three Local program cities look for when utilizing technology during the school choice process different and similar between different types of technology? Why?
  - How is the information parents in the three Local program cities look for when utilizing technology during the school choice process different and similar between different genders, income groups, ethnicities? Why?

### **3.2 Project design**

GreatSchools has established the following tentative framework for the research, to be adjusted by the successful candidate:

*2-3 interview-and-observation series with 5-10 respondents in each city (3 cities total) that represent a representative range of incomes, ethnicities, age of oldest child, and genders. Respondents should be primary caregivers who within the last year chose a school for their oldest child, or are currently in the process of choosing a school for their oldest child.*

- Each interview should last between 45 minutes and 1 hour.
- Since GreatSchools will be looking to develop both city-specific on-the-ground experiences and city-agnostic online experiences, we believe that it is crucial that researchers have both city-specific knowledge and knowledge of technology and parenting. For this reason, each interview should be conducted by a member of the successful candidate's team *together with a local researcher from the city in question*
- An incentive should be provided to informants to compensate them for their time
- The first interview should be very unstructured so as to understand in the most comprehensive terms possible the respondent's relationship to technology
- The second interview should be semi-structured and draw on the first to dig deeper into the questions about technology, intermediaries, and decision-making that are especially interesting to GreatSchools
- The third interview should also be semi-structured, and draw on the first and second to probe around how technology and education, and more specifically, technology and school choice, interact for the respondent (or *could interact* for them).

The research should result in a set of recommendations for GreatSchools as to how we should balance online/technological and on-the-ground content delivery strategies when implementing the Indianapolis Local program and reworking the Milwaukee and DC Local programs (with an eye to expanding to additional cities in the future).

Correspondingly, proposals should include the following:

- Any changes you would propose to the research framework based on your expertise, understanding of the scope of work, key questions and budgetary concerns
- Your strategy to assure that we (and other stakeholders) have confidence in the findings
- Your plan to incentivize participants
- Your sampling strategy and plan as to how to recruit and retain participants
- Your plan as to how to recruit, compensate, and retain local, in-city researchers from Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and Washington, DC
- Your plan about how you will choose, make contact with, and confirm research sites (for interviews and observation)
- Your proposed research instruments/methodologies
- Discussion of the potential problem areas and what approach(es) you would take to avoid or alleviate such problems
- Your plan as to how to analyze and present your findings

### **3.3 Project management plan**

The proposal should describe, and will be judged on, the following factors:

- What you will do
- What GreatSchools will be expected to do
- Timeline
- Budget
- Expected amount of time the project director and other key project personnel will spend on the project

### **3.4 Key personnel**

Applicants should briefly describe the qualifications, including relevant education, training and experience of key personnel, including the project director. Curriculum vitae may be included for those evaluators who will work on this project. Please indicate the status of each person's relationship to your firm or

organization, whether an employee, partner, or to be engaged by contractual agreement. We are particularly interested in the following qualifications:

- Background of researchers (applied, academic, etc.)
- Disciplines of researchers (anthropology, sociology, etc.)

### **3.5 Past performance and capacity**

Describe recent or current work that is similar or related to this project with explicit reference to your capacity to complete this work. This may include links to completed projects.

- Describe your experience in the areas of research that utilizes ethnographic methodologies in at least the following areas: K-12 education, adult education, web-based education or e-learning, low-income minority communities, Spanish language speakers, technology (including web sites, social networks, email, mobile) FERPA-compliant methods, mixed methodologies, and school and/or household-level research.
- Describe your methodological training and experience in the following areas: open-ended, semi-structured, and structured interviewing, unobtrusive observation, coding interviews, developing protocols, recruiting and retaining participants
- Provide contact information for three clients for whom you have conducted similar research.

### **3.6 Budget**

The currently allocated budget is \$30,000. We recognize that this is a constrained budget--In your proposal, please describe what project scope a \$30,000 budget would encompass and (optionally) address what could be accomplished with additional funds up to \$50,000. We recognize that this scope may not include all of the elements detailed above.

The proposal should include a description of budget costs with a breakdown for specific deliverables. Please be sure to include costs for personnel broken out by person, administrative/supervisory staff, incentives, and estimates for travel. You may list alternative approaches that could be traded off against each other. These approaches may add up to more than \$30K; if you do this, please include a narrative that describes the strengths and weaknesses of the alternative approaches -- a starting point for the discussion that we would have if we proceeded to the next round of discussion.

### **3.7 Selection Process**

Proposals will be reviewed by an internal GreatSchools committee comprised of the Director of Business Insights, the Research Analysts, and other staff members. The two finalists may be invited to present and discuss the proposal with the review committee either live or via conference call between January 12-13, 2012. The final award decision will be based on a combination of proposed project design, proposed management plan, past performance, personnel qualifications, cost, and just as important, our sense that an organization would be a good fit. We reserve the right to select one organization or a combination of firms to provide the services requested.