

Collaborations for Impact in Education (CFI-Ed)
Call for Researcher-System partnerships to apply

Dates:

November 1, 2017: Call disseminated
December 15, 2017: Letter of intent due
January 15, 2018: Applications due
Winter 2018: Applicants notified
Spring 2018: Workshop at University of Chicago
Summer 2018: Final design of initial programs to study
Academic year 2018/2019: Launch of first series of projects
Winter 2019: Inaugural conference

How to Apply/Process:

Submit a brief letter of intent to apply by December 15, 2017, with full application due January 15, 2018. Complete application packages can be submitted by email to mslee@uchicago.edu (download application form [here](#)).

Contacts:

Questions about this call for partners should be directed to: Min Sok Lee (mslee@uchicago.edu)

Summary:

[Collaborations for Impact Education](#) (CFI-Ed) is a new initiative by The University of Chicago and Professors John List and Dana Suskind. We are working to develop a **network of researcher-system partnership sites** (i.e., partnerships between university researchers and a school district or a university researcher and a network of early childcare facilities, etc.). The aim is to help these partnerships tackle the most pressing issues facing education systems today by serving as **laboratories of innovations that catalyze coordinated research to test, replicate, and scale** promising interventions. Over time, CFI-Ed will advance our understanding of the science of scaling.

Evidence-based policies increasingly rely on innovations that have been shown to be effective (i.e., statistically significant) via randomized control trials (RCTs). When taken to scale, these innovations often fail to truly benefit their aimed population. We believe that the main reasons are that the findings of the initial RCTs are not replicated is that the interventions themselves are not designed to overcome the threats to scalability. Thus, our network of laboratory sites will focus on testing a few interventions at a time and **threats to scalability directly**.

By establishing a long-term, sustainable network of like-minded laboratories of innovations, CFI-Ed aims to:

- **Shorten the time** of the research cycle from innovation, testing, replication and scaling
- **Increase coordination** of research priorities and policy initiatives.
- **Provide transparency** so that public and charitable resources are allocated to the most promising interventions.
- Ultimately, **speak to policymakers** as they make decisions on programs that affect millions of children.

The target audience for this call includes:

- **Existing partnerships** between researchers and school districts or other practitioners with a proven track record of successfully implementing programs. **They will be given special consideration.**
 - a. An existing partnership with a successfully-run initial RCT looking for other laboratories for independent replication of that tested innovation/program.
 - b. Or, you apply as an existing partnership site looking for novel innovations to test via RCTs.
- **Researchers** who have identified systems for potential partnership, but have not carried out any investigation yet. CFI-Ed can provide both financial support and our expertise to establish a long-lasting research partnership.
- **Researchers** with a demonstrated interest in educational research from a wide range of disciplines, including economics, early childhood education, developmental psychology, and related social sciences who are interested in partnering with an education system.
- **School district and early childhood program leaders** (superintendents, research directors) who are familiar with research processes and protocols and who are interested in partnering with a researcher to become a CFI-Ed site.

Background:

The science of scaling. The hallmark of public policy decision-making is benefit-cost analysis. To do benefit-cost analysis effectively, it takes proper measurement of both benefits and costs. Recently there has been a surge in field experiments, or randomized control trials (RCTs) to measure the benefit side of interventions. While many have been found to have substantial benefits, whether and to what extent these benefits manifest themselves in large-scale settings remains an open question.

With an eye towards scaling up to the greater population, CFI-Ed sites will provide the necessary insights into overcoming barriers to scalability. As a network of researcher-system partnership sites, individual interventions will be evaluated through replication – as opposed to the standard practice of conducting purely novel RCTs.

This work not only focuses on the “voltage” problem, but also on the broader implications of scaling interventions on the benefit-cost ratio. This approach admits economics as a powerful tool to understand the scaling problem at the macro level. In this way, we are leveraging the economic science to provide unique insights into the scaling problem.

Threats to scalability. The work of [Al-Ubaydli, List, and Suskind \(2017\)](#)¹ describes threats to scalability as being composed of two major types. On the one hand, there is the voltage effect, which occurs when the treatment effect size is considerably smaller at scale than what researchers find in the initial investigation. Al-Ubaydli et al.’s (2017) work includes a model that provides insights into why this voltage effect might occur. It includes false positives, representation of population, and representativeness of the situation.

¹Al-Ubaydli, O., List, J.A., and Suskind, D. L., 2017. What Can We Learn From Experiments? Understanding the Threats to the Scalability of Experimental Results. *American Economic Review P&P*, 105(5), pp.462-66.

But what the theory also shows is that even if there is no voltage effect, there is still an important potential scaling problem in that the benefit-cost ratio might not be the same at scale as what the initial investigation showed. For example, just considering the cost side, it might be more difficult to hire 10,000 excellent tutors than it is to hire 100 excellent tutors (on both the quality and cost side). Accordingly, even if the quality of tutors is identical over the 10,000, the benefit-cost ratio might get smaller if you have to pay more for the 10,000th tutor than you paid for the first 100 tutors.

You can find a more in-depth description of the science of scaling [here](#).

How we will Evaluate Applications:

CFI-Ed will focus only on a few innovations coordinated across its network of laboratories for testing and replicating with an eye to scaling. Although we will sacrifice the number of novel RCTs, we gain on a small number of innovations that have real potential for impact at scale. Because CFI-Ed is in its initial phase of network-building, we will give special consideration to existing partnerships that have demonstrated success implementing and evaluating educational projects. Applicants will be chosen based on:

- **Demonstrated experience** running RCTs and implementing programs with fidelity
- **Demonstrated commitment to research processes**, particularly by the system (i.e., school districts, early childcare facilities, hospitals and community based social service programs) to test innovative interventions in existing channels.
- **Buy-in into the shared research agenda** implementing experiments approved by CFI-Ed.²
- **Engagement from community stakeholders** including additional funding from local/national foundations and donors both for research and resources for long-term sustainability of the partnership site.

Benefits:

Admission to the CFI-Ed network affords partners several benefits, including:

- **Seed funding** for implementing interventions approved by CFI-Ed in the amount of \$50k-\$100k per year to each site.
- **Opportunities for collaboration** with other researchers in the network (joint projects and publications)
- **Access to top researchers** in the network sites and a community of researchers for idea generation and feedback
- **Dedicated CFI-Ed capacity** to help facilitate implementation, testing, and adjustment of the RCT to suite your site's specific needs.
- **Shared learning** through access to CFI-Ed insights and proven programs for implementation at scale.
- **Credibility** to raise local resources/funds for further innovation.

Eligibility:

- K-12 and early childhood partnerships are encouraged to apply.

² However, we do expect a positive externality in the form of a more productive laboratory site to run your own experiments that do not interfere with the CFI investigation.

- K-12 partnerships should be between researcher and school district or organization entity that oversees multiple schools (e.g., CMOs).
- Early childhood (birth to five) partnerships should be between researcher and centers or existing network of early childhood sites.
- Partnership sites should include:
 - **A system component** (e.g., a school district, cluster of schools, network of charter schools or early childhood centers, etc.).
 - **A research component** in the form of a researcher or academic group at a university, think-tank, or other institution located near the system component. Based on insights from our own work, proximity is a necessary condition for ensuring a successful, long-lasting partnership.
- We welcome applications from **academics in a range of disciplines**, including economics, early childhood education, developmental psychology, and other related social sciences.

Requirements:

Due to the nature of partnerships, and the emphasis we are placing on the ability to participate in the CFI-Ed network into the future, we require detailed assurances that the researchers, school districts, and other interested partners share a high level of commitment. This includes:

- A written **statement of agreement** between the academic team and the system. This agreement should include two key components:
 1. **Data sharing agreement** between researcher and the system (can be with CFI-Ed or just with researcher, who commits to sharing relevant results) including administrative data. We also accept documentation that shows the data sharing agreement is in process.
 2. Letter of permission or **memorandum of understanding** between the researcher and the system to conduct low cost RCTs using the core infrastructure of the system. We also accept documentation that shows the MOU is in process.
- **Statement of interest** describing:
 - Main research question(s) the partnership is currently most interested in pursuing.
 - Evidence that the partnership will be successful, including prior work together, planned meetings for experiment organization, logistical plans for data sharing.
 - Interest in collaborating with other researchers to replicate or scale up promising programs.
 - Expertise and background of the academic team including publications and CVs of researchers on the team.

An Example of Successful Research/System Partnership:

In 2010, John List and others launched the Chicago Heights Early Childhood Center (CHECC), a large-scale field experiment that enrolled over 3,000 low-income households into one of several interventions or to a control group. The field experiment was funded through a \$10 million grant from the Kenneth and Anne Griffin Foundation and involved a strong partnership with School Districts 170 and 206 in Illinois, which continues to this day. This partnership has allowed the research to turn this site into a laboratory for innovations. In addition to the main early childhood education intervention, this partnership has run experiments in health (e.g., food choice by

students in the lunchroom), discrimination in preschool children, and loss aversion to mention just a few.

Research areas:

By design, this call for partners is interdisciplinary. We expect research questions that cover the broad spectrum of education from birth to pre-k and k-12 through college. The following are some of the research questions that we are already pursuing:

- Variation in non-cognitive and cognitive skills in children or adults can explain, among others, labor market outcomes by influencing schooling decisions, employment, and wages. These non-cognitive skills are largely determined in the early phases of childhood development where the surrounding environment plays a critical role. This environment is mostly influenced by the parents and, as a result, early parental investments or inputs can produce more optimal adult outcomes.
- Parent participation in preschool and kindergarten activities is associated with higher levels of educational attainment of their kids, which points to potential benefits of early childhood programs that promote parental involvement.
- The quality of parent-child interactions in the early months of life influence later cognitive ability, and parent-based interventions aimed at expressive language development yields language gains that may prevent the emergence of disparities in the foundational brain development of young children.