

**F. M. KIRBY FOUNDATION SOLICITATION EVALUATION FORM**

**DATE:** November 7, 2024

**REQUEST DATE:** October 23, 2024

**Program Area:** Education

**Grant Type:** Board Grant

**APPLICANT:**

Hill Center, Inc.

3200 Pickett Road

Durham, NC 27705-6010

**CONTACT:** Mr. Bryan Brander, Executive Director & Head of School

**AMOUNT REQUESTED:** \$150,000

**BUDGETED AMOUNT:** \$125,000

**NATURE OF REQUEST:** General Operating Support and Literacy Intervention Tutoring in Durham Public Schools

**GRANT HISTORY**

**SUPPORT:** 2003-2023

**# OF APPROVED GRANTS:** 17

**TOTAL DOLLARS:** \$3,445,000

**LAST GRANT DATE:** 12/08/2023

**LAST GRANT AMOUNT:** \$150,000

**FYE DATE:** 06/30

**AFS DATE:** 09/26/2024

<b>Year Approved</b>	<b>Approved Amount</b>	<b>Approval Date</b>	<b>Grant Purpose</b>
2023	\$150,000	12/08/2023	General Operating Support - \$100,000; Support for the Furthering Access Initiative - \$50,000
2022	\$125,000	12/12/2022	Toward support for Furthering Access Initiatives-\$55,000
2021	\$150,000	12/20/2021	Toward support of Further Access and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion initiatives-\$75,000
2020	\$125,000	04/29/2020	Toward Hill support of School Student Financial Aid-\$25,000
2019	\$100,000	04/15/2019	General Operating Support

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**LAST SITE VISIT DATE:** October 18, 2021

**ENDORSEE:** Laura H. Virkler, Ashley Freedman, and Alice Horton

**FINANCIAL ANALYSIS COMMENTS:** The FY25 operating budget is projecting a \$147K surplus with revenues and expenses increasing by 2% and 6.8% over the prior year, respectively. Revenues related to student programs are expected to grow by 9% overall, caused by increases in earned income generated by the Hill School and tutoring programs. Professional learning and partnerships income is expected to decline by 31%, largely due to unusually high revenues and releases from restricted funds in FY24 related to the sale of HillRAP. FY24 saw an operating surplus of \$538K. The request narrative notes that, in FY24, Hill exceeded their fundraising goal for the year, raising nearly \$1.4M to support core programs. The 2024 FMKF grant of \$150K represented 10.7% of this total. The FY24 audit (FYE 6/30) shows \$26M in total current assets (sans property and equipment) and a cash position of \$9M. Investments totaled \$16.4M, representing 63% of total current assets. Endowment fund assets (\$12.8M) represent 78% of total investments. Once property, equipment, and pledges receivable are factored in, Hill had \$32.3M in total assets. FY24 saw a \$2M surplus. Program expenses represented 82% of total functional expenses. At FYE, Hill had \$7M in financial assets available to meet general expenditure needs over the next year.

**ORGANIZATION DESCRIPTION:** Hill Center supports students, educators, and families in the Triangle community with programs that meet the needs of students with learning differences, attention challenges, and gaps in foundational academic and executive function skills. Through our student programs, professional learning offerings, and family and community engagement opportunities, Hill is committed to ensuring that every child in our community has access to the right resources to achieve success in school and life.

**GINA BEVIGLIA COMMENTS:** It has been another exciting, productive, and successful year at Hill Learning Center. As their core work to support students with learning differences in the Triangle community has continued, Hill has also undergone a year of strategic planning, vision-setting, and leadership transitions. On August 12<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Bryan Brander assumed the role of Executive Director and Head of School, succeeding former Executive Director Beth Anderson. Bryan has been with Hill for 17 years and, while serving in various leadership roles, has taught nearly every piece of the Hill curriculum. Beth will continue to serve in a Senior Strategic Advisor position, focusing largely on fundraising and development, for the remainder of this school year. While Bryan's new role is not identical to Beth's former position — he is adding the responsibilities of Executive Director to his previous Head of School role — Hill's new staffing model encourages leadership amongst various staff teams. Hill has integrated co-leadership of departments, elevated Level Coordinators to Directors, and added new organizational, strategic, and school leadership teams. Creating systems for leadership farther down the totem pole will allow Bryan to continue successfully running the Hill School while overseeing the Hill organization as a whole. The most significant update from this past year is the adoption of a five-year strategic plan. There are several notable elements of this new strategic vision. The first is a total commitment to the Triangle community — "Hill is going local," as their strategic vision one-pager says. Hill hopes to become a greater resource to all students with learning differences in the

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Triangle Region, regardless of their family's resources or whether they have a formal diagnosis. I think it is telling that, coming off the sale of HillRAP, Hill has decided to launch a strategic plan focusing on "scaling deep versus scaling broad." While HillRAP was an enormous success, both for the organization and the students in farther-flung geographies who will benefit from its curriculum, I appreciate that Hill leadership recognized that there are so many more students who could be reaping the benefits of their tried-and-true programming right at home in the Triangle. Another notable element of this strategy is the explicit naming of Hill's dedication to students with foundational academic gaps and executive function challenges; these are students that have been previously served by Hill through tutoring or community school integration programs, but the new strategy makes this commitment more defined. The strategic vision has three overlapping focus areas with annual goals and programming: Strengthening Programs, Expanding Access, and Community Engagement. I will use these three sub-headings to delve into Hill's activities from the past year and their plans for the coming year.

### **Strengthening Programs**

Hill School is enrolling 177 students in the 2024/25 school year, on par with the 2023/24 figure of 176. Of this total, 70% of students are returning and 67 individual schools and 5 counties are represented. The Hill Summer Program, five weeks of daily reading, writing, and math instruction for first through eighth graders, served 160 students, falling 8 students shy of full capacity. This is the first year that Hill saw a decreased demand for their summer program, which they feel is reflective of increased competition in the summer enrichment space and the potentially prohibitive cost (\$3,225 for five weeks). Hill leadership is planning to take a step back and examine the Summer Program model to ascertain if any changes can be made to boost enrollment and increase return on investment. I give credit to Hill leadership for paying attention and thinking strategically about these shifts. While a deficit of eight students may not seem to constitute an immediate crisis, the Summer Program is an important revenue source for Hill and a crucial way for a wide demographic to engage with an intensive curriculum. It seems prudent to consider what, if anything, can be done to strengthen and bolster this program before enrollment declines even further. A piece of good news is that three students from El Futuro received full scholarships to attend both Hill and Durham Academy's summer programs. Finally, Hill Family Tutoring continued to serve students year-round with 1:1 and group tutoring options. Individual tutoring hours in 2023/24 remained on par with the prior school year (7,301) while family tutoring hours fell 28% (3,816 to 2,744). As such, Hill leadership is considering different class models and the potential to shift resources to executive function focused curriculum.

The strategic vision's theme of "scaling deep" will apply to Hill's Professional Learning Opportunities as well. Following a period of broad scaling, Hill will now focus on more intensive outreach and engagement with their existing clients. This population of current clients includes school districts, private and independent schools, charter schools, and Hill affiliate schools. In the past year, Hill trained 131 new teachers in the RAP curriculum and supported 309 existing RAP clients. As part of a strategy to deepen relationships with local public school districts, two new districts (Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Orange County) have designated RAP as their primary Tier 3 literacy intervention; in these two districts this year, 238 and 241 students were served with this curriculum, respectively. Additionally, 1,442 students in 41 North Carolina public schools received RAP in their own classroom, taught either by a RAP-certified teacher or a Hill educator. Finally,

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over 2,000 educators participated in Hill’s professional development offerings, whether online or in-person. In Hill’s 2023 request, it was noted that professional development had been de-prioritized during the sale of RAP, leading JJK to question how this historically important piece of Hill’s programming will fit into future strategies. From this year’s report, it seems that professional development continues to be an important piece of the Hill model, demonstrated by the impressive engagement mentioned previously and the rollout of brand-new training courses focusing on learning differences and ADHD.

## **Expanding Access**

I will focus my Expanding Access comments on Hill’s 2024 request for support of Literacy Intervention Tutoring in Durham Public Schools. While Hill’s dedication to slowing tuition growth while refining financial aid structures is an important component of increasing the accessibility of their programming, I find the Literacy Intervention Tutoring to be the most compelling way Hill is looking to support students across the Triangle. Because the majority of Triangle-area students with learning differences will never have the opportunity to attend Hill School, Literacy Intervention Tutoring places Hill educators in public schools to work with small groups of students in need of additional support. This individualized instruction model (maximum of 4:1 teacher to student ratio) allows students to receive high doses of RAP curriculum in the midst of their school day. This program is crucial for ensuring that students with learning differences receive the specialized instruction they need and providing much-needed capacity to school districts. Hill reports that public school staffing models assume that 5-10% of students will need additional support; in reality, the total is closer to 30-35%. This number can be even higher in schools serving a large percentage of low-income students or students who do not speak English at home. In the past, Durham Public Schools and Hill have jointly covered the cost of executing this program (as per Beth Anderson, roughly \$45K per school per year). A series of unfortunate circumstances — staffing shortages, the “ESSER cliff,” and a financial mismanagement scandal in DPS — have meant that LIT funding options have decreased, while demand for the program has increased. Instead of simply accepting that DPS cannot afford to host LIT this year, Hill has increased their goal to meet increasing student needs, hoping to serve 4 DPS schools and 2 Durham charters this year (the charter school programs are being supported by a State grant). This means that support for LIT in Durham will constitute a greater fundraising priority than Hill originally anticipated. The organization has successfully secured grants from the Kenan Charitable Trust and The Forest at Duke, as well as a small amount of Title I Schools funds, but a funding gap remains. Additional support from FMKF in 2024, designated for Literacy Intervention Tutoring in DPS, would allow Hill to deliver RAP to 3-4 groups of students in 4 schools, 3-4 days a week, for 20 weeks, resulting in each student receiving 80 sessions of specialized reading support. The success of LIT, in DPS and in other districts, is measured through student growth on standardized tests. Hill anticipates that most LIT students (80% for younger grades and 60% for older grades) will demonstrate targeted skills growth that is 60% faster than their peers. Because students who are receiving LIT interventions are likely already far below grade level standards, this accelerated growth is crucial for catching up to peers.

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## **Community Engagement**

Finally, the third aspect of the Hill strategic plan focuses on Community Engagement. As a trusted leader in the learning differences space, Hill is well positioned to build key relationships with organizations and leaders serving diverse communities in the Triangle. The hope is that, upon establishing systems for reaching out to these entities, partnerships leading to the destigmatization and a greater awareness of learning differences in communities of color can be formed. As part of this outreach, Hill plans to offer six community education forums that are free to the public.

As part of this new three-pronged strategy, Hill hopes to emphasize to funders the importance of supporting these three areas of growth in equal regard. In other words, Hill recognizes that future success for the organization requires balanced prioritization of core programming, accessible access, and innovative community engagement. I suspect that this even-keeled approach stems from the inevitable de-prioritization of certain facets of programming that occurred during the scaling and sale of RAP. This recognition of the potential to scale deeper in the Triangle Region is admirable and, as a community-focused funder, it is great to hear that Hill is making an even greater commitment to the communities we hold dear. While the Foundation has viewed general operating support as a means for granting our partners the flexibility to meet priority areas in the ways they see fit, I recognize the potential benefits of restricted funding. The semi-urgent financial situation in DPS coupled with the increasing learning needs of students in those schools presents an opportunity for FMKF to use our budget flexibility to have an increased impact on students in Durham. I have had several conversations with Hill leadership (Beth, Bryan, and Julie) this summer and felt increasingly impressed with the caliber of Hill's programs and dedication to the mission with every interaction. The longitudinal impact evaluation, consistent striving to increase accessibility, and centering of student needs demonstrated by Hill are truly commendable. As such, I am pleased to recommend a grant of \$150,000, designated for general operating support and support of Literacy Intervention Tutoring in Durham Public Schools, as outlined below.

**RECOMMENDATION:** I recommend a grant of \$150,000, payable over 1 year designated for general operating support and support of Literacy Intervention Tutoring in Durham Public Schools, as follows:

- General Operating Support - \$125,000
- Support of Literacy Intervention Tutoring in Durham Public Schools - \$25,000

**JUSTIN J. KICZEK COMMENTS:** How interesting to think about the cycles of Hill over the years now. Hill started as a small, community-focused institution, with a mission to meet the unaddressed needs of local children with learning differences. Given their success as well as their entrepreneurial mindset, Hill scaled up their literacy pedagogy and professional development opportunities, through both HillRAP and of course the construction of the Kirby-Horton Teacher Training Center. All along, former Executive Director Beth Anderson has been very frank with us about both the promise and challenges of such organizational development, something we should keep in mind as we try to encourage innovation at other organizations through the Innovation Engine program. Now, we see not so much a retrenchment, but a deepening of impact within their original local focus. Interesting to think just a year ago, we were looking at the map of the expansion throughout the state, envisioning Hill being a statewide leader. Now — and this is not a

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knock on them — we see Hill opt to go deeper into Durham, particularly with the expansion of the public school Literacy Intervention Tutoring, a program for which I share GEB's enthusiasm.

All this said, Hill is also communicating that they are not taking their foot off the pedal in terms of innovation. The executive function online course under development will allow Hill to meet learner needs anywhere.

We should note here that Hill continues to be one of the most thoughtful partnerships we have with a grantee. Much of the credit here has to go to Beth, who has been a steadfast leader throughout significant periods of change. Beth never sought to hide from us her questions, her doubts, her challenges, helping us learn in the process as well and building trust between the two organizations. In true character, she was also thoughtfully handled (from our view) the succession process, giving Bryan plenty of time to observe and learn from her, while also giving him the latitude to develop the strategic plan that he and the current Board envisioned.

N.B.: FMKF Board Chair Laura Virkler also serves as Board Chair of Hill Center. Laura did not influence the outcome of the grant recommendation and will abstain from voting when the grant is up for Board approval.

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**DISPOSITION:**

- Declination
- Hold for review on/about:
- Approval for: **\$150,000**
- Recommended Grant Payment(s):  
**2024:**  
**2025:**  
**2026:**
- Hold for Board Review: **December 13, 2024**
- Payee Other Than Addressee:
- Other:

Initials:     JJK    

Date: October 23, 2024

Check #                     

Date: