

SOLE SOURCE DETERMINATION AND WRITTEN JUSTIFICATION

Pursuant to S.C. Code Ann. § 11-35-1560 and S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105

District Turnaround and Superintendent Support Services

Purchasing Agency:	South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE)
Contractor:	Vendor # 7000393095 Laura Hickson
Estimated Contract Value:	\$18,750
Contract Period:	8/18/2026 – 6/30/2027
Date of Determination:	8/18/2026

I. LEGAL BASIS FOR SOLE SOURCE PROCUREMENT

This determination is made pursuant to S.C. Code Ann. § 11-35-1560(A) and S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105, which authorize award of a contract without competition when the head of the purchasing agency, the chief procurement officer, or a designee above the level of the procurement officer determines in writing that there is only one source for the required service. This determination has been made by the undersigned authorized official, who is above the level of the procurement officer, as required by S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105(C).

In accordance with S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105(C), this written determination contains sufficient factual grounds and reasoning to provide an informed, objective explanation for the sole source decision. In cases of reasonable doubt, competition is required to be solicited. SCDE has determined that no reasonable doubt exists regarding the sole source nature of this procurement, as set forth in detail below.

II. DESCRIPTION OF AGENCY NEED

The South Carolina Department of Education requires specialized district turnaround, leadership coaching, and implementation support services for specific school districts currently identified for intensive state support, intervention, or transformation efforts under South Carolina's accountability framework.

The agency's need is not for general educational consulting services. The agency requires personnel possessing specific, first-hand knowledge of existing district conditions, current improvement plan status, active corrective actions, established stakeholder relationships, and superintendent-level executive leadership experience within South Carolina public education. The required services include:

- Executive coaching and mentoring of district superintendents and district leadership teams;
- District improvement planning and implementation support;
- Organizational and operational effectiveness guidance;
- School board governance support;
- Strategic planning and stakeholder engagement;
- Monitoring of corrective actions and improvement initiatives;
- Coordination with SCDE staff regarding district performance and accountability requirements; and
- Periodic written reports and recommendations to SCDE.

The districts receiving support are currently engaged in active improvement activities. Interruption or transition of services at this stage would negatively affect implementation timelines, existing corrective action plans, and district performance outcomes, resulting in duplication of effort and additional cost to the State.

III. DESCRIPTION OF SERVICES TO BE PROCURED

The contractor will provide specialized district transformation and superintendent support services, including:

- District diagnostic review and assessment;
- Executive coaching for superintendents and district leadership teams;
- Strategic planning and implementation support;
- Board of trustees governance assistance;
- Continuous improvement monitoring and reporting;
- Operational and organizational effectiveness support;
- Stakeholder and community engagement support;
- Development of recommendations and corrective action strategies;
- Coordination with SCDE staff regarding district improvement initiatives; and
- Periodic written reports and recommendations.

IV. MARKET RESEARCH CONDUCTED

Prior to making this sole source determination, SCDE conducted market research in accordance with State procurement requirements. SCDE reviewed the availability of educational consulting firms, retired school district superintendents, independent education consultants, and district improvement specialists capable of providing district transformation services comparable to those required.

Market research identified numerous vendors able to provide general educational consulting, professional development, leadership training, and school improvement assistance. However, SCDE determined that these providers generally offer broad consulting services and do not possess the specific combination of qualifications required by this procurement, specifically:

- Prior direct involvement with the specific school districts currently receiving support;
- Existing first-hand knowledge of district improvement plans, current corrective actions, and implementation status;
- Superintendent-level executive leadership experience in South Carolina public schools;
- Demonstrated experience working directly with districts undergoing South Carolina state intervention or intensive state monitoring;
- Established working relationships with the specific district leaders, boards of trustees, SCDE staff, and community stakeholders involved in ongoing improvement efforts; and
- Ability to continue active district support immediately without additional onboarding, needs assessment, or transition periods.

SCDE specifically considered whether replacement consultants possessing some relevant qualifications could perform the required services. The agency determined that any replacement provider would require substantial time to gain adequate familiarity with the specific district conditions, historical improvement efforts, stakeholder dynamics, existing corrective actions, and implementation status. This necessary transition period would delay active improvement work, result in duplication of prior effort, and impose additional cost upon the State.

V. SOLE SOURCE JUSTIFICATION AND WRITTEN DETERMINATION

Pursuant to S.C. Code Ann. § 11-35-1560(A) and S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105, SCDE determines that the identified contractor is the only source reasonably capable of meeting the agency's current needs. Any request that a procurement be restricted to one potential contractor must be accompanied by an explanation as to why no other contractor will be suitable or acceptable to meet the need. That explanation follows.

A. Direct Prior Involvement with the Specific Districts Receiving Support

The identified contractor has already participated in district improvement efforts involving the affected school districts. The contractor possesses extensive first-hand knowledge of each district's operations, leadership structures, performance challenges, existing corrective actions, and established stakeholder relationships. This knowledge was developed through direct, sustained engagement and cannot be replicated by any other provider without substantial additional time and expense. No other available provider possesses this direct, district-specific experience.

B. Unique Institutional Knowledge That Cannot Be Transferred

The contractor possesses institutional and operational knowledge developed through direct engagement with specific district leadership teams, boards of trustees, SCDE personnel, and community stakeholders involved in ongoing improvement efforts. This knowledge base is specific to these districts, these personnel, and these improvement plans. It is not transferable to another provider without a substantial period of onboarding, assessment, and relationship development that would delay implementation and duplicate prior work funded by the State.

C. Continuity of Active, Time-Sensitive Improvement Efforts

The districts supported through this engagement are currently involved in ongoing improvement activities under active state monitoring. Transitioning to a new provider at this stage would require reassessment of district conditions, onboarding, redevelopment of working relationships, and duplication of prior analysis and planning work. Such disruption would delay district improvement efforts, jeopardize implementation timelines, and undermine outcomes that the State has already invested resources in achieving.

D. Specialized South Carolina Public Education Experience

The contractor possesses extensive superintendent-level leadership experience within South Carolina public education and demonstrated expertise in addressing district governance, finance, accountability, academic performance, and organizational improvement issues under South Carolina laws, regulations, and accountability systems. This South Carolina-specific expertise is essential to the services required and is not generally available from consultants whose experience is in other states or in other educational contexts.

E. Absence of Any Equivalent Alternative Source

Market research identified other educational consultants; however, no other provider was identified who possesses the full combination of: (1) direct prior involvement with the specific affected districts; (2) existing institutional knowledge of current improvement plans and corrective actions; (3) established working relationships with the specific district leaders, boards, and SCDE staff involved; (4) superintendent-level leadership experience in South Carolina public schools; (5) South Carolina accountability-specific expertise; and (6) the ability to continue active district support immediately without disruption. No other source is reasonably capable of satisfying the agency's actual needs as described herein.

VI. CONTRACTOR-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

B. Laura Hickson

Ms. Hickson possesses superintendent-level experience, extensive expertise in district financial improvement and operational effectiveness, and direct knowledge of South Carolina school systems. She has provided support connected to implementation activities associated with district improvement initiatives and the HOPE Resource Center framework. Her continued participation ensures continuity of active improvement efforts currently underway. No other reasonably available consultant possesses equivalent direct knowledge of the specific district conditions and active improvement initiatives with which Ms. Hickson has been engaged.

VII. PRICE REASONABLENESS

SCDE has determined that the proposed contract price is fair and reasonable based on the following: [Insert basis for price reasonableness determination, e.g., comparison to prior contract rates, prevailing market rates for comparable consultant services, independent cost estimate, etc.]. Documentation supporting this determination is on file in the procurement record.

VIII. CERTIFICATION AND AUTHORIZATION

The undersigned, being the head of the purchasing agency or a designee above the level of the procurement officer as required by S.C. Code Ann. § 11-35-1560(A) and S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105(C), hereby certifies that:

- The information contained in this determination is accurate and complete to the best of my knowledge;
- The identified contractor is the only source reasonably capable of meeting the agency's needs as described herein;

- This determination contains sufficient factual grounds and reasoning to provide an informed, objective explanation for the sole source decision, as required by S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105(C);
- This determination is authorized prior to contract execution, as required by S.C. Reg. 19-445.2105(C); and
- The required public notice will be posted in South Carolina Business Opportunities in accordance with S.C. Code Ann. § 11-35-1560(A) prior to contract execution (unless a written determination that notice is not in the interest of the State is made by the appropriate chief procurement officer after consultation with the agency head).

Required Signatures:

Prepared by: Allana Prosser Date: 8/18/2026

Printed Name: Allana Prosser

Title: Executive Director

Approved by: Ellen E. Weaver Approval Date: 8/19/2026

Printed Name: Ellen Weaver

Title: Superintendent