CIRM
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE FOR REGENERATIVE MEDICINE

EDUC3: Funding Opportunity for Summer Programs to Accelerate Regenerative Medicine Knowledge (SPARK)

Request for Applications
December 18, 2025

EDUC3 Awards: Funding Opportunity for Summer Programs to Accelerate Regenerative Medicine Knowledge (SPARK)

Summary

OVERVIEW	
Objective	• To inspire, educate, and motivate high school students to become involved in CIRM's mission to accelerate world-class science and deliver transformative regenerative medicine treatments in an equitable manner to a diverse California and world • To provide summer training opportunities and broaden participation in stem cell, gene therapy, and related research to high school students, including those who might not otherwise have opportunities for summer research internships due to social, geographic, or other constraints
Scope	SPARK Awards support mentored, hands-on summer internships for high school students in regenerative medicine related science. Each program is led by a qualified program director who is responsible for coordinating all activities supported by the program, including recruitment and selection of qualified trainees and tracking program alumni. Additional activities include educational enhancements, patient engagement, community outreach, and participation in a culminating summer conference. To broaden internship possibilities, an applicant institution may collaborate with other organizations to provide broader program access to candidate trainees/interns.
Recurrence	This is a one-time funding opportunity

AWARD DETAILS	
Max Award Amount	$704,000
Max Award Duration	5 years

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS	
Applicant Organization	• Must be a California public university or college, or private, non-profit academic institution accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC); or a California Organization with a documented track record of successfully delivering laboratory-based research training to high school students • Must have, or have had within the last two years at the time of application, a high school summer internship program
Collaborating Institutions	Must have sites in California with appropriate personnel and facilities to accommodate high school summer interns
Program Director	Must have experience administering educational programs for high school students

SCHEDULE AND DEADLINES	
Application Due Date	Once in 2026
GWG Review	Approximately 90 days after application due date
Award Approval	Approximately 60 days after GWG Review
Start Date	Within 90 days of award approval

CONTACT AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
https://www.cirm.ca.gov/researchers/education-conference-grants-and-research-training-awards/
For additional information on the program or applications, contact education@cirm.ca.gov. For questions related to the review and approval of applications, contact review@cirm.ca.gov.
Additional requirements and definitions incorporated here by reference may be found in **CIRM Funding Opportunities: Common Requirements and Definitions.**

Background

The mission of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) is to accelerate world class science to deliver transformative regenerative medicine treatments in an equitable manner to a diverse California and world. In September of 2024, CIRM's Governing Board, the Independent Citizens' Oversight Committee (ICOC), approved a Strategic Allocation Framework (SAF) to guide and optimize the value of CIRM's current and future investments. One key outcome of this exercise was defining an ambitious goal to bolster CIRM's workforce development programs to address gaps and meet evolving demands in regenerative medicine. To this end, the EDUC3 Awards were renewed, thereby sustaining the value of existing programs while extending the scope of internship projects, updating award amounts, and encouraging collaboration with CIRM Infrastructure and R&D programs.

Objective

The objective of the Summer Program to Accelerate Regenerative Medicine Knowledge (SPARK) is to provide summer training opportunities and broaden participation in stem cell, gene therapy, and related research to high school students, including those who might not otherwise have opportunities for summer research internships due to social, geographic, or other constraints. Through summer lab internships, community outreach, and patient engagement, CIRM hopes to inspire, educate, and motivate high school students to become involved in CIRM's mission to accelerate world-class science and deliver transformative regenerative medicine treatments in an equitable manner to a diverse California and world.

Scope

Each SPARK program must include the following components:

- **Trainee Placement and Recruitment Plan**, to raise awareness and provide opportunities for qualified persons across California, including those who might not otherwise have opportunities for summer research internships due to social, geographic, or other constraints.

- **Summer internships,** in which trainees participate in hands-on, regenerative medicine-related research that is relevant to understanding or treating a human disease. Internships can be supported for up to 12 weeks and must take place in appropriate host laboratories or facilities at the applicant institution or at a collaborating organization.

- **Patient and healthcare engagement activities,** designed to engage trainees with patients or patient advocates and provide insights into the challenges of developing new cell therapies and drugs. As one component of these activities, programs might include participation in blood donation drives, bone marrow registries or similar awareness campaigns.

- **Community outreach and education**, in which trainees participate in educating diverse California communities about stem cells, gene therapy and regenerative medicine, and gain awareness of issues around health care and access. For example, trainees can utilize social media to share blogs, videos or pictures of their internship activities, or create other educational content that can be shared. A workshop or course on presentation of science to the public/lay audiences is required as a component of these activities.

- **Auxiliary educational activities,** such as workshop or a short course, that prepare the trainees for their research activities prior to their internship project start date. An introduction to research ethics must be included.

- **Alumni tracking plan,** to enable annual assessment and reporting on college acceptance, choice of major, and other post-SPARK outcomes.

- **Sharing knowledge** including approaches, outcomes, resources and events within and outside of the institution, and specifically with CIRM via platforms such as the CIRM Hub, to facilitate resource-sharing and collaboration across all CIRM workforce development programs.

Award Amount and Duration

EDUC3 Awards will be made in the form of a grant and will provide up to 5 years of support that includes direct project costs of up to $640,000 + 10% indirect costs on eligible expenses. Each award can support up to 12 trainees per year, and the maximum total award amount per program over five years is $704,000. The total requested amount is subject to adjustments prior to the issuance of an award based on assessments by the Grants Working Group (GWG), the CIRM team, or by the Application Review Subcommittee of the ICOC.

Applicants are encouraged to expand trainee participation and the size of their programs by involving additional trainees supported from other sources, if funding is available.

Award Budget Structure (Direct Project Costs)

1. Trainee Funds

The award will provide up to the following amounts per trainee:

a) <u>Trainee stipends</u>: up to $5,500 for a full-time internship up to 12 weeks in duration

b) <u>Travel funds</u>**:** up to $1,000. These funds must be used to cover costs to travel and attend a CIRM sponsored poster day held at the end of the summer. Excess travel funds may be used to cover other program-related travel for the trainee.

2. Program Administration Funds

Up to $4,167 per year per trainee may be requested for administrative support salaries; activities focused on patient engagement, community outreach, or other activities that enhance the educational value of the program; and mentor stipends or supplies budget for the host lab, if appropriate. Adequate justification for all Program Administration expenses must be provided.

Program activities

CIRM **will fund** the following activities under this opportunity:

REQUIRED ACTIVITIES	
✓	Trainee recruitment and selection
✓	Summer internships at host laboratories or facilities in which trainees participate in hands-on regenerative medicine-related research involving stem cells, gene therapy and/or other critical research or development activities relevant to understanding or treating a human condition or disease

✓	Auxiliary educational activities
✓	Patient/Healthcare engagement activities
✓	Community outreach/education activities
✓	Alumni tracking and engagement
✓	Sharing of knowledge and resources generated through Award

ALLOWABLE ACTIVITIES	
✓	Collaborating with CIRM INFR sites for tours, workshops, courses, certifications, community engagement, etc.
✓	Collaborating with other organizations to provide workshops or activities of value that complement the SPARK program
✓	Activities to counsel or support SPARK students for college application

CIRM **will not fund** the following activities under this opportunity:

UNALLOWABLE ACTIVITIES	
✘	Costs incurred on or before the date of ICOC approval
✘	Activities already budgeted or paid for under a prior, existing or pending CIRM award, or which are already supported by another funder

Provisional timetable

This EDUC3 funding opportunity will occur one time.

PROVISIONAL TIMETABLE	
Applications Open	Once in 2026
Applications Due	Approximately 60 days after applications open
Grants Working Group (GWG) Review	Approximately 90 days after applications due
Application Review Subcommittee (ARS) Award Approval	Approximately 60 days after Grants Working Group Review
Award Start	Within 90 days of award approval

Eligibility

All the following requirements must be fully satisfied for an application to be accepted and considered for funding by CIRM.

(1) Programs must be led by a qualified Program Director (PD).

The PD is the individual who directs the planning and execution of the summer internship program including primary responsibility for all programmatic and administrative aspects of the program and adherence to budgetary, policy, and reporting requirements. The PD must be an employee with relevant experience at the applicant institution or be accountable for the conduct of the proposed project to the applicant organization through a formal contract.

(2) **The applicant institution must have an existing high school summer internship program that the SPARK program would supplement, or have had such a program within the past two years at the time of application.**

(3) **The applicant institution must be a California public university or college, or private, non-profit academic institution in California that is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC); or a California-based Organization with a documented track record of successfully delivering laboratory-based research training to high school students.**

Refer to CIRM Funding Opportunities: Common Requirements and Definitions for CIRM's definition of a California Organization.

(4) **The applicant institution must have established partnerships with trainee internship host sites and mentors (internally or through a collaborating institution).**

If internships will take place at a collaborating institution, documentation verifying this collaboration should be provided in the application as a letter of support.

(5) **Collaborating institutions must have a California site or location with appropriate personnel and facilities to accommodate high school students.**

(6) **The application must be complete and accurate.**

All required components of the application must be completed and may not contain any false or inaccurate information.

(7) **The applicant must be in good standing.**

Applicants and their affiliates must represent and certify that they are in good standing, as described in CIRM Funding Opportunities: Common Requirements and Definitions.

(8) **An applicant institution may submit only one application under this opportunity.**

(9) **The applicant must be ready to initiate work on the funded project within the 90 days of approval**

Given the urgency of CIRM's mission, all approved awardees must initiate work on the funded project within 90 days of award approval and authorization for funding by the Application Review Subcommittee (ARS) of CIRM's governing board, the Independent Citizens' Oversight Committee (ICOC).

Application Preparation

Consultations

In accordance with CIRM's mission, the Agency is committed to facilitating the development of promising stem cell-based technologies and genetic therapies by supporting the next generation of regenerative medicine scientists. Therefore, prospective applicants have the opportunity to request consultations with CIRM Science Officers to address inquiries regarding eligibility, budgets and other topics to enhance alignment with program objectives and CIRM requirements. To start a consultation request, please email education@cirm.ca.gov.

How does one submit an application?

Applications must be completed and submitted online using the CIRM Grants Management Portal at **https://grants.cirm.ca.gov**. **A prospective PD must create a login in the system to access and submit application materials.**

Applications are available in the system only to the PD. Organizations that have not previously applied for CIRM funding should create a separate login for the designated AOO and request authorization of that individual prior to submitting.

What components does an application include?

CIRM applications are comprised of an online form and document uploads. The application is designed to collect information for CIRM staff to assess eligibility, for Grants Working Group (GWG) reviewers to evaluate the project, and for CIRM to rapidly initiate an award if the project is approved for funding. In the online form, applicants must complete an eligibility section, indicate Key Personnel involved in the project, and provide budgetary information. The document uploads section, found in the online application form, provides templates and guidelines for writing the Proposal, Biosketches, Letters of Support, Trainee Outcomes, and other key components of the application. Applicants **must** use the provided templates and adhere to the prescribed page formatting and page limits.

What are the contents of the Application Proposal?

The Proposal comprises the bulk of detailed information on the project, organized within the following sections:

1. **Program Summary:** High level overview of the proposed training program including the number of trainees to be supported, the nature and scope of courses and ancillary educational activities, and the range of research internship opportunities available to trainees in the program.

2. **Trainee Selection and Placement:** description of how trainees (including those who might not otherwise have opportunities for summer internships due to social, geographic, or other constraints) will be recruited and selected for the program and how trainees will be placed in internships.

3. **Auxiliary Educational Activities:** description of plans to introduce trainees to the concept of research ethics, and other proposed short courses/workshops to prepare the trainees for their internship activities prior to their project start date, as well has how trainee progress and accomplishment will be assessed throughout the summer program.

4. **Patient and Healthcare Engagement Activities:** description of planned activities, nature of trainee involvement and potential to enhance trainees' understanding of the challenges of being a patient.

5. **Community Outreach:** description of course/workshop to prepare trainees for communicating science to members of the public, and planned activities for enabling trainees to share their regenerative medicine experiences with a diverse and broader audience as well as opportunities to gain awareness of community perceptions of science and healthcare access.

6. **Alumni Tracking Plan:** description of plans to annually collect and report outcome of program alumni including college acceptance, choice of major, any degrees achieved, and post-graduate employment positions.

7. **Program Leadership and Administration:** description of plans for the educational and administrative leadership and program oversight; description of the qualifications for the Program Director.

8. **Prior Program Track Record and Outcomes:** description of prior Creativity, SPARK Awards (if applicable) or other similar programs including success in recruiting qualified students from different backgrounds and quantitation of program outcomes (success rate of previously enrolled trainees that have gained admission into a college in a science-related field).

9. **Resource and Knowledge Sharing Plan:** Description of how approaches, outcomes, resources, and events within and outside of the institution will be shared with other institutions as well as with CIRM.

10. **Population Impact:** Description of how the team will incorporate perspectives from communities representing the breadth of California and promote awareness in trainees of how genetic, environmental, and societal factors can impact scientific outcomes and access of different populations to scientific advances.

11. **Internship-host Institutions:** (if applicable): list of any partnering institutions with which agreements or arrangements for trainee placement have been established or planned.

What should one know before preparing the budget?

Budgets must be justified in detail, including all subcontracts and consulting fees, including, if applicable, any additional costs that would be funded from another source.

The CIRM Award is subject to a total Award cost cap of Allowable Project Costs. Allowable Project Costs are detailed in the CIRM Grants Administration Policy for Discovery, Translation, and Education Projects. All budgetary requests must be indicated on the online application form. Limits for each budget category are indicated above (Award Amount and Duration: Budget Components) and must be observed. Budget justification for "Program Administration Funds" should provide sufficient detail to allow evaluation of the appropriateness of the costs in relation to the activities proposed. Budget justification for "Trainee Funds" is not required; however, the number of trainee positions should be justified in the "Program Summary" section of the Proposal. Refer to CIRM Funding Opportunities: Common Requirements and Definitions for additional information and definitions to aid in budget preparation.

Indirect Costs

Applicant institutions are limited to a maximum of 10 percent of allowable Direct Research Funding Costs, exclusive of the costs of Equipment, Tuition and Fees, Research Patient Care Costs, and the total cost of each service contract, Subcontract and Consultant agreement in excess of $50,000.

Change in Status

Applicants are required to notify CIRM of any material change in status while the application is pending review (e.g., a change in PD, the applicant no longer qualifies as an eligible organization, etc.).

Application Review Information

What is the process for evaluating an application?

Eligibility Review

CIRM will assess whether the proposed project meets eligibility requirements sought under this program. If CIRM determines, in its sole discretion, that an application does not meet the eligibility requirements of the program or that the submitted application is incomplete or contains false or inaccurate information, CIRM will notify the applicant of its decision and, if CIRM deems it appropriate, allow an opportunity to remedy. If CIRM deems it inappropriate, or if the applicant does not remedy the error in a timely manner, CIRM will terminate all further action on the application. CIRM may exercise its authority to make eligibility determinations at any time before an award is executed.

Scientific Review

The scientific and educational merit of each application is assessed by the GWG, which is composed of fifteen subject matter experts from outside California, seven patient advocate or nurse members of the ICOC (called "GWG Board Members"), and the Chair of the ICOC. The list of scientific members who may participate in the GWG review can be found at https://www.cirm.ca.gov/about-cirm/working-groups/. The composition of the ICOC can be viewed on the CIRM website at https://www.cirm.ca.gov/about-cirm/governing-board/.

The fifteen participating scientists on the GWG evaluate the applications and score them on a scale of 1-100 according to scientific and technical merit, applying the review criteria described below. The GWG scientific members will score each application and the full GWG will make funding recommendations to the Application Review Subcommittee of the ICOC.

For purposes of making funding recommendations to CIRM's board, each application shall be assigned to one of two categories based on the median score as follows:

Median score 85 and above: The application has exceptional merit and warrants funding, if funds are available; or

Median score below 85: The application is not recommended for funding.

The Application Review Subcommittee of the ICOC makes final funding decisions.

Consideration of Past CIRM Award Information (If Applicable)

The GWG may consider information from a previously funded and related CIRM award as part of its review. CIRM provides the GWG with objective information regarding a related award that CIRM, in its sole discretion, deems relevant, including but not limited to achievement of specific milestones, data, and outcomes.

A "related CIRM award" includes: (1) an award for which the applicant PD served as the PI/PD, a co-PI, a co-investigator, or otherwise substantially participated in the conduct of the award; or (2) an award that includes overlapping team members.

Confidentiality

CIRM's confidentiality and conflict screening rules apply to everyone who will have access to applications or who will attend any review meeting in which confidential information is discussed, including but not limited to CIRM team members, reviewers and members of the ICOC. (Per Gov. Code §6254.5(e), non-public records may be disclosed to government agencies under confidentiality agreements).

How will the scientific merit of an application be evaluated?

Applications will be scored based on the following review criteria.

1. **Value Proposition:** Evaluate the program's value and potential for impact.

   - Assess the extent to which the proposed training program is likely to have a meaningful, positive impact on trainees' awareness of stem cell science and regenerative medicine

   - Assess the likelihood that the program will foster a commitment among trainees and participants to CIRM's Mission

   - Evaluate the potential of the program to broaden the participation of high school students in stem cell, gene therapy, and related science, including to those who might not otherwise have opportunities for summer research internships due to social, geographic, or other constraints

2. **Plan & Design:** Evaluate the program's plan and design to achieve the program objectives.

   - Assess the extent to which trainees will receive a quality, first-hand experience in stem/progenitor cells, gene therapy and/or other critical laboratory or practical skill sets relevant to understanding or treating a human condition

   - Evaluate whether the program objectives will be achieved within the proposed budget and timeline

   - Assess the quality of the plan for annual tracking of trainee outcomes, including college acceptance, choice of major, and post-graduate employment positions taken by program alumni

3. **Program Team and Resources:** Evaluate the expertise and resources proposed to achieve the training program objectives.

   - Assess whether the program has access to all the necessary resources, including personnel and key partnerships, to implement and carry out the proposed training program.

   - Evaluate the program director's qualifications for managing and leading the training program

   - Assess the applicant institution's commitment to supporting achievement of program objectives

   - Evaluate outcomes reported for prior CIRM-funded or other similar training or educational programs that demonstrate success in recruiting qualified students of varying backgrounds and perspectives, and supporting their progression to successful next steps

4. **Population Impact:** Evaluate the extent to which the program considers the potential impact of the proposed training across broad segments of the population.

- Assess plans to incorporate perspectives from communities that are systematically underrepresented in STEM or have had limited access to STEM exposure and opportunity including those that may not be present on the Program Team
- Evaluate plans to provide trainees with awareness of how genetic, environmental, and societal factors can impact the practice of science and the access of different communities to scientific advances

Award Administration

Issuance of Award

CIRM issues awards through a Notice of Award (NOA), which serves as the official contract defining terms, conditions, and funding commitments. Before finalizing the NOA, CIRM reserves the right to modify project activities and budgets. After consulting with project teams, CIRM, where appropriate, may establish success criteria, and timelines based on application information. CIRM will also review key agreements critical to program success to ensure compliance with applicable policies and regulations.

How Funds Will be Awarded

Awards will be made in the form of a grant. CIRM will disburse funds pursuant to a Notice of Award. The first payment will be issued upon initiation of an award and continued funding will be contingent upon timely progress. Where progress is not satisfactory, CIRM reserves the right to either redirect resources to maximize the program outcome or, at its sole discretion, to suspend payment and/or terminate the Award. Five percent (5%) of the award budget will be withheld pending completion of all reporting requirements.

Reporting

Awardees will be required to provide periodic reporting to CIRM according to the terms of the Notice of Award. These include periodic progress reports, annual financial reports, trainee appointment and completion forms.

Trainee appointment forms include the planned activities for each trainee and are submitted prior to start of the appointment period. Completion forms are due at the end of the final appointment period that include summaries of the trainees' activities and post-award plans.

Carry Forward and No-Cost Extensions

CIRM allows carry-forward of funds from one grant year to the next in order to allow use of those funds in a way that best serves the trainees. All Unobligated funds remaining at the end of the program must be returned to CIRM.

No-cost extensions (NCEs) are only permitted under exceptional circumstances where an extension would facilitate the completion of a trainee's normal internship term; such an extension would require prior authorization from CIRM.

CIRM Regulations and Policies

Grant awards made through this RFA will be subject to all applicable CIRM regulations. These regulations can be found at https://www.cirm.ca.gov/our-funding/cirm-stem-cell-grant-regulations.

Resources

For more information about this and CIRM's other Education programs, please visit our Current Funding Opportunities page to access program announcements, webinar materials and FAQs. For programmatic questions that are not addressed in the above resources, send email correspondence to education@cirm.ca.gov.

For questions related to application review, send email correspondence to review@cirm.ca.gov.

For questions related to budgets or allowable project costs, please consult the Grants Management FAQ on CIRM's website under "For Researchers > Grants > Managing your Grant." For more information on budgets or allowable costs that are not addressed in the above resources, send email correspondence to grantsmanagement@cirm.ca.gov.

Terms used here are defined in CIRM Funding Opportunities: Common Requirements and Definitions.

CIRM Hub

CIRM offers a rich array of resources designed to support and accelerate individual projects. The CIRM Hub is a centralized platform to facilitate collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, resources, and opportunities between CIRM-supported Education and Infrastructure programs. Applicants are encouraged to engage with the Alpha Clinics, Manufacturing Network, Community Care Centers of Excellence, and Shared Resource Labs as partners for internship opportunities in their EDUC3 applications. Please visit the CIRM Hub to explore all offerings.