

The Early Learning Challenge Grant Is Helping States Better Serve Infants and Toddlers



The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (ELC) grant program is a joint effort by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to improve early learning and development for young children. It does so by supporting states' efforts to: increase the number of children with high needs, birth to five, in high-quality early childhood settings; and build comprehensive early childhood systems. Fourteen states have received four-year ELC grants ranging from \$20 to \$70 million since the program was initiated in 2011. Though states are not using a significant portion of their grants to fund initiatives targeting infants and toddlers specifically, their efforts to strengthen the systems that support all young children and families will reap many benefits for babies.

ELC grantees are making a number of improvements to their early childhood systems, such as: revising standards for, and expanding participation in, tiered quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS); increasing access to high-quality coaching and mentoring for early childhood educators; developing and aligning early learning guidelines (ELGs); and strengthening health and developmental screening practices. These activities are improving the quality of care infants and toddlers receive while their parents are working and increasing the likelihood that very young children with health or developmental delays are identified and referred to services in a timely manner.

The ELC was a great catalyst to bring child-serving agencies together to develop a shared plan for action. States have another chance to receive federal funds, as ED and HHS released the application for a second ELC competition in August 2013.

First ELC Grantees Make Progress Implementing Plans

California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington were the first states to receive ELC grants in December 2011. Each outlined an ambitious plan with multiple strategies to improve the quality of early childhood services and increase the number of children and families with high needs accessing them. The complexity of states' multi-pronged approaches, coupled with the short timeframe for achieving outcomes required by the grant, necessitated

ELC Grant Priorities

The ELC asks states to develop plans that address the following priorities:*

1. Promoting school readiness for children with high needs (absolute priority)
2. Including all early learning and development programs in the tiered quality rating and improvement system (competitive preference priority)
3. Understanding the status of children's learning and development at kindergarten entry (competitive preference priority)
4. Sustaining program effects in the early elementary grades (invitational priority)**
5. Encouraging private-sector support (invitational priority)

*The final application for the ELC released in August 2013 added another competitive preference priority of "Addressing the needs of children in rural areas"

**The final application for the ELC released in August 2013 revised this priority to "Creating preschool through third grade approaches to sustain improved early learning outcomes through the early elementary grades" and made this a competitive preference priority

that states quickly begin building infrastructure to implement their plans. States spent much of the first year of the grant recruiting, hiring, and training staff; issuing Requests for Proposals and executing contracts; establishing partnerships; and developing leadership and capacity in communities that are receiving ELC funds. These activities took longer than expected in several states, causing slight delays in some project schedules, but all grantees now have a strong foundation for moving the grant work forward.

The ELC was purposely designed to require real collaboration within and between state agencies, local organizations, and families. Grantees have made great strides in achieving this goal. They have actively engaged the public in planning and implementing grant activities by hosting focus groups and regional forums, issuing public surveys and requests for comments on proposals, forming local planning and implementation committees, and creating websites specifically dedicated to reporting progress and collecting feedback on ELC work.

There is significant momentum in the early childhood community to get the work done. This excitement extends to policymakers as well. Several of the nine states passed legislation that facilitates or builds on the ELC work by:

- creating new governance structures for early childhood services;
- requiring early care and education programs to participate in the QRIS;
- increasing state funds for ELC-aligned initiatives; or
- assigning unique identifiers to children participating in publicly-funded early childhood services.

What Have We Learned?

The first year of the ELC revealed that to effectively implement their grants, states must:

- Build new capacity in communities to provide high-quality services to children and families.
- Establish processes to foster effective communication within and across state agencies, community organizations, and other early childhood stakeholders.
- Engage families in planning and implementation to ensure initiatives meet their needs.
- Integrate ELC-funded and non-ELC-funded early childhood initiatives so that they are part of one comprehensive system.
- Remain flexible to respond to challenges and take advantage of new opportunities.

Although the ELC is not being used as a vehicle to move many initiatives specific to infants and toddlers, grantees are intentionally connecting the work to other efforts focused on very young children. For example, some regions in Washington are encouraging child care providers to work with Infant/Toddler Consultants in preparation for joining the QRIS. In Minnesota, some of the same people involved in the ELC grant are also engaged in the *Building Power for Babies* initiative, which aims to develop policy recommendations that will promote positive outcomes for infants and toddlers. These collaborations will benefit children of all ages.

Some of the key activities of California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington over the first year of the ELC grant are highlighted below:

Californiaⁱ

- California is investing nearly 75% of its ELC grant at the local level to support a voluntary network of 17 Regional Leadership Consortia to develop and operate local QRIS. The Consortia agreed on a points-based hybrid rating system approach and developed three common tiers that all local QRIS will use. The elements and points for the common tiers are outlined in the *Quality Continuum Framework Consortia Hybrid Matrix*. The Consortia also created a corresponding *Quality Improvement and Professional Development Pathways* document.
- The state executed contracts to provide infant-toddler trainings to home visiting program staff; provide training on developmental screening for local Consortia members; and develop several online courses providing overviews of the California Collaborative for the Social-Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CCSEFEL) teaching pyramid.
- California began work to expand the core early learning curricula offered at state community colleges. Three new courses are being developed: one focused on infants and toddlers, one on children with special needs, and one on program administration. Community college faculty are currently identifying existing courses that align with the three topic areas and will convene a series of regional meetings to present their findings and discuss next steps.

Delaware

- The state is making progress with the roll-out of its revised QRIS. The first year revealed that child care providers serving very young children require specialized support to improve quality. To meet this need, Delaware is adding two Infant-Toddler Specialists to its QRIS technical assistance group.
- The state is moving forward with the use of the ASQ as the standard developmental screening instrument in child-serving programs. Early care and education, child welfare, and maternal and child health programs have agreed to use the tool. Professional development providers are currently being trained on appropriate use of the ASQ, and full implementation is expected by the end of 2013.
- Additional Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) consultants were hired, doubling the capacity of the state's ECMH consultation program. ECMH consultants provide child- and program-specific consultation and training to early childhood educators to help them effectively interact with young children and manage challenging behaviors.
- Health Ambassadors and a new call center have been integrated into the state's Help Me Grow program with the explicit goal of making more comprehensive referrals for families with young children, particularly into Part C.

ⁱ Though California received a phase one ELC grant, the state received approximately 50% of its original request in 2011.

Maryland

- Two Community Hubs were established in under-resourced communities in Baltimore to provide and coordinate services for families with children birth to five. Hubs provide family support services such as parenting education, health education, and employment readiness activities; connect pregnant women and parents to center-based and home visiting programs; conduct outreach to child care providers to engage them in professional development opportunities; and work with families to ease transitions as children move from early childhood programs to school.
- Two new Judy Center satellite sites have been established at Title I schools in Baltimore. Judy Centers provide a central location for early childhood education and support services, including health-related screenings and service referrals, for children birth to five.
- The state developed a number of partnerships with pediatricians, family practice physicians, and mental health providers to support the use of developmental screening instruments as well as early detection and intervention in mental health.
- The Maryland Family Engagement Coalition was established. Representatives of many child- and family-serving agencies, organizations, and programs are working together to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate Maryland-specific strategies for improving the quality of family engagement based on the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.

Massachusetts

- Twenty-four communities serving over 8,000 children received grants to implement evidence-based early literacy models to help parents support their 0-5 year old children's literacy skills.
- Massachusetts selected the ASQ and ASQ:SE as screening tools. ASQ and ASQ:SE toolkits were distributed to the 99 Coordinated Family and Community Engagement (CFCE) network grantees, organizations that provide informal supports to families for early childhood development. Training on how the tools can be used to help parents understand the science and domains of development and to link families to community opportunities to support their children's needs was provided to CFCE organizations.
- In an effort to spread knowledge about child development across diverse audiences, the state translated its *Infant/Toddler Guidelines* and *Guidelines for Preschool Early Learning* into five languages in addition to English.
- The state developed an online QRIS fundamentals course that explores the current science of brain development, describes the five categories of the QRIS Standards, and offers strategies for applying the knowledge to an early education or out-of-school time program. Over 1,500 educators have accessed the course since the launch.

Minnesota

- A 30-hour Infant-Toddler Certificate curriculum is under development, which will meet the training requirements for Parent Aware, the state's QRIS, and qualify participants to meet the Minnesota Association of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Endorsement at Level 1.

- The Interagency Developmental Screening Task Force began developing an implementation, training, and evaluation plan to pilot online access to the ASQ and ASQ:SE. The online developmental screening tools will be available to public health, school districts, child welfare, home visiting, health care, and mental health providers.
- Low-cost training around health and safety was provided to Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers to meet a new legislative training requirement that went into effect in November 2011 for legal non-licensed providers serving families receiving child care assistance. Seventy-six percent of children in FFN care in Minnesota are under the age of 3.
- The Center for Inclusive Child Care expanded the availability of coaching, consultation, and technical assistance to early care and education providers who have children with special needs in their care. Intensive services are now available statewide.

North Carolina

- North Carolina selected a small set of rural, poor counties in the northeastern part of the state to participate in a Transformation Zone initiative, which will implement a series of early learning strategies to support young children and families and help communities build capacity for implementing high-quality programs. Leadership and implementation teams made up of agency representatives, content experts, and local early childhood stakeholders were established at the state and local levels.
- The Division of Public Health engaged in planning for contracting with the Center for Child and Family Health and the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University to support the development of capacity within the Transformation Zone counties to effectively implement and sustain Northeast Connects, a short-term, community-based, universal newborn nurse home visiting program.
- The North Carolina Partnership for Children began efforts to expand the Assuring Better Child Health and Development (ABCD) model. ABCD works to increase health and developmental screening and referral rates for all young children by integrating routine developmental screening into well-child visits, using either the ASQ or the Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS).
- North Carolina awarded a contract to develop a CEU-bearing course on the new *North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development*, early learning standards for children birth to five. Planning has also begun on train-the-trainer and cross-sector institutes to roll out the course.

Ohio

- Local Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) boards hired ECMH consultants to work with providers serving children with high needs and to support early childhood professionals' use of standards and assessments related to social and emotional development and approaches toward learning.
- The State Board of Education adopted comprehensive *Early Learning and Development Standards* (ELDs) for children birth to kindergarten entry in October 2012. The new standards

replace the *Infant and Toddler Guidelines* and *Pre-Kindergarten Content Standards* that the state previously used. The ELDs address all essential domains of school readiness and serve as the foundation for the revised TQRIS, comprehensive assessment system, and professional development system.

- Ohio began revising the state's Core Knowledge and Competencies (CKCs) to meet the newly revamped TQRIS model and new ELDs. The state is developing training that will be used when the CKCs are rolled out. Plans are also underway to develop formative instruction modules, which will support implementation of appropriate activities based on ongoing assessment related to each domain of the standards.
- Ohio enacted legislation requiring the use of a common unique identification number for all children birth to five in publicly-funded programs. The unique identification number stays with children through post-secondary school in district settings.

Rhode Island

- The state developed new *Early Learning and Development Standards for Children Birth to Five*. The Board of Education voted to adopt them in May 2013. The state had originally planned to create standards for infants and toddlers separately from its pre-K standards, but decided that a single document with a birth-to-five continuum would better allow parents and practitioners to understand and support young children's development.
- In recognition that child care providers serving infants have higher costs, Rhode Island structured its QRIS Program Quality Awards to support infant care for children up to 18 months old. Centers and homes that offer infant care at BrightStars levels 3, 4, and 5 are eligible to receive Program Quality Awards. The awards are intended to offset increased operating costs for programs at higher quality levels.
- The state began accepting applications for Interim Quality Improvement grants in April 2013. Licensed child care centers and public preschool programs can apply for up to \$30,000 and licensed family child care homes can apply for up to \$5,000 to support their quality improvement plans. The Departments of Education and Human Services will jointly award grants until the \$400,000 funding pool is expended; the Departments intend to make approximately \$5 million available for a second round of funding, beginning in July 2013.
- Part C Early Interventionists are piloting the use of Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG), a formative assessment tool used for ongoing planning and monitoring. The state hopes use of TSG will improve the transition of children from Part C to Part B. TSG is already used by all preschool special education classrooms and state-funded pre-kindergarten classrooms.

Washington

- The Department of Early Learning, in partnership with the community and technical college system, created a three-stage stackable certificate in early childhood education, which aligns with the newly adopted Core Competencies and Early Learning and Development Guidelines. The certificates utilize consistent course numbers, course descriptions, and learning objectives. They build on each other to lead to a state credential that articulates into an Associate degree. The second certificate allows professionals to specialize in one of several areas, including infant-

toddler care. All three certificates are reflected on the career lattice and eligible for professional development incentives.

- Washington implemented a trainer approval process to ensure that state-approved trainers who deliver required continuing education are content experts and have knowledge and expertise in adult learning. Individuals who deliver training on the state's Early Learning and Development Guidelines and Executive Function must demonstrate competency with infants and toddlers.
- Washington began statewide implementation of Early Achievers, the state's QRIS, in July 2012. Over 1,000 early learning facilities are currently participating. Some regions are intentionally connecting Early Achievers with their Infant/Toddler Child Care (I/T CC) Consultation Initiative, marketing I/T CC consultation as a readiness activity to prepare for participation in Early Achievers. I/T CC consultants work with licensed child care providers to help them support the needs of infants and toddlers.

Phase Two ELC Grant Recipients Have Big Plans Despite Smaller Awards

Phase two of the ELC invited the five next highest scoring states from phase one (Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin) to reapply for grants in October 2012. Applicants were required to revise their original applications to reflect a 50% reduction in funds. Approximately \$133 million was awarded to the five states (grants ranged from \$20 to \$35 million) in December 2012. Despite having to cut their ELC budgets, phase two awardees kept much of their plans intact, capitalizing on work that was completed in the year since the original application was submitted. Similar to the first grant recipients, phase two awardees plan to pursue a variety of broad strategies that will positively impact infants and toddlers, including developing and expanding QRIS, exploring financial incentives for increasing child care quality, increasing access to high-quality professional development, and targeting multiple supports to select high-need communities. A snapshot listing some of the proposals states included in their plans that will benefit infants and toddlers is below.

Colorado

- An Early Childhood Data System and web portal will be built to provide information on programs, providers, and children to inform continuous quality improvement. The portal will also serve as a resource for parents with information on early childhood development, Early Learning and Development Guidelines, and QRIS ratings. All materials will be provided in English and Spanish. A universal application for early childhood programs will be built into the web portal.
- Child care providers in communities with large concentrations of families with high needs will be recruited to participate in shared service alliances, a model that aims to reduce child care providers' back-office costs so they can focus financial and human resources on the quality of care provided to children. Shared services may include collective purchases of supplies, central administration of government food and tuition programs, pooled resources for professional development, and automated records to ease reporting.
- Colorado increased the budget for coaching in its revised ELC application. The state plans to create a formal structure to support and expand coaching, develop coaching resources tied to the new *Core Competencies for Early Childhood Teachers and Directors*, and create a coaching

endorsement or credential.

Illinois

- In-person and web-based training on the newly revised Early Learning Guidelines (for children birth to three) will be developed. Train-the-trainer sessions will be held for staff in child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies, the Illinois Resource Center, the Illinois Birth to Three Institute, members of the Illinois Trainers Network, and those who provide training to Head Start and Early Head Start programs.
- Six to eight Communities of Concentrated High Need (CCHN) will be selected to engage in a local planning process to increase the number and percentage of children with high needs enrolled in high-quality early learning and development programs. CCHN may choose from a list of strategies developed by the state, including providing scholarships to educators to obtain the Gateways to Opportunity Level 5 Infant Toddler Credential, which will be required for center-based programs receiving Illinois Prevention Initiative funds by 2015. ELC funds will support implementation of the selected strategies.
- Sixteen Quality Specialists will be added across the 16 regional CCR&R agencies to support early learning and development programs in improving quality.

New Mexico

- Five Early Learning Investment Zones will be created in communities that have large numbers of children with high needs and lack the infrastructure for delivering high-quality services. The state will provide technical assistance and planning support to help communities develop locally-driven early learning system plans and build readiness for implementing them.
- New Mexico's revised QRIS (FOCUS), which uses the state's Early Learning Guidelines as the foundation for a new observation-documentation-curriculum planning process, will be implemented across the state. Appropriate elements of FOCUS will be adapted into the home visiting and early intervention arenas in years 3 and 4 of the ELC grant.
- The revised *New Mexico Early Learning Guidelines: Birth through Kindergarten* will be fully integrated into FOCUS and the professional development system. A train-the-consultant model will be developed, and the state will hold a faculty retreat focused on incorporating the ELGs into all early childhood education courses at the associate and bachelor levels.

Oregon

- Oregon will improve the rates of health, oral health, developmental, and family risk screening at standard intervals. Strategies will include identifying training needs and curriculum for different audiences who will administer screening, assessing community capacity and resources, and developing referral protocols for follow-up screening.
- Oregon is redesigning its QRIS, expanding it from three tiers to five. A number of incentives and supports will be utilized to promote participation and advancement to higher-quality tiers, including specialized technical assistance, coaching, and vouchers for educational materials.
- Unique child identifiers will be assigned to children with high needs participating in publicly-funded early learning and development programs and receiving child care subsidies.

- Family support managers will help connect families and children with high needs to appropriate resources and high-quality early learning and development programs.

Wisconsin

- The state recently completed the California Collaborative for the Social-Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CCSEFEL) Pyramid Model Demonstration Project to increase training and improve practice in the domain of social and emotional development. ELC funds will allow Pyramid Model training coordinators to provide targeted training and coaching in high need areas.
- The validation study of YoungStar, Wisconsin's QRIS, is being broadened in a few ways, one of which specifically addresses children birth to three. Classrooms and programs serving infants and toddlers will be oversampled in the study to enable researchers to explore the quality of infant-toddler settings and offer objective and tangible advice for policy and practice changes targeted to the youngest children in care.
- A Family Engagement Consultant will develop a progression of standards for family engagement that will be used to determine mandatory points in YoungStar at all levels.
- To meet increased demand for professional development, Wisconsin increased its ELC budget for scholarships by \$1 million in its phase two application. Scholarships will be targeted to areas with high concentrations of 2-star programs and children with high needs.

New ELC Grant Competition Looks Similar to First

Supplemental grants for California, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin were announced on August 2nd totaling just under \$89 million. The additional awards will bring the total funding for each state to 75% of their original requests.

An estimated \$280 million will also support a new ELC competition for states that do not currently have grants. ED and HHS released the final application for the competition in August 2013. It is very similar to the 2011 application, with only a few substantive changes.

The fourteen states that have already received ELC funding are well on their way to building more comprehensive early childhood systems that better meet the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. The new competition offers additional states the same opportunity. Children with high needs across the country will benefit as a result.

Additional Resources

ZERO TO THREE has three additional resources to help states think about how the ELC can be used to address the unique needs of infants and toddlers:

- [Early Learning Challenge \(ELC\) Resource List](#) – This annotated bibliography includes resources from the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center and the former National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative at ZERO TO THREE. The resources are organized by the ELC selection criteria to best provide assistance in how areas affecting infants and toddlers align with each of the criteria.

- [Including Infants and Toddlers in the Early Learning Challenge \(ELC\)](#) – This PowerPoint emphasizes the importance of supporting early learning beginning from birth and provides information on how the unique needs of infants and toddlers can be addressed in each of the RTT-ELC selection criteria areas.
- [How Early Learning Challenge Grant Recipients are Targeting Infants & Toddlers](#) – This article, released in January 2012, is an analysis of the first nine ELC grantees' applications. The article found that while all of the grant recipients' plans will positively impact infants and toddlers through a variety of broad strategies, some states targeted very young children specifically by including proposals focused on infants and toddlers.

The Department of Education maintains a website with information about the ELC grant program, including states' applications and progress reports, the proposed priorities for the new ELC competition, and press releases about the program [here](#).

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