

**North Carolina Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant
Transformation Zone Evaluation
Synthesis Report Executive Summary**

Noreen Yazejian, Kathleen Gallagher, Sandra Cianciolo, and Meredith Jones
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

December 15, 2015

The *North Carolina RttT-ELC Transformation Zone* was designed to: (1) demonstrate the efficacy of an intensive, comprehensive approach to providing high quality early childhood and family services, and (2) build knowledge and infrastructure needed to scale up similar efforts in other parts of the state. Via implementation of several child and family service strategies, the initiative provides high-intensity supports and community infrastructure building efforts in high need rural communities to transform outcomes for young children, particularly as related to school readiness. Since February of 2014, the Transformation Zone (TZ) evaluation team has examined how the state of North Carolina and four participating counties have enhanced their capacity to provide high quality services for young children and families. Beaufort, Bertie, Chowan, and Hyde counties have participated in the collaborative early childhood system change initiative engaging regional and local service providers and county and state agencies.

County and state agencies and local service providers have received technical assistance from the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) and developers of the ABLLe Change Framework. NIRN has supported the active implementation of evidence-based practices, including establishing state and county implementation teams, identifying implementation drivers, and using data to inform a Plan-Do-Study-Act approach (Metz & Bartley, 2012). The ABLLe Change Framework has supported community efforts that include systemic action learning teams, simple rules, and small wins (Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2011).

The overall purpose of the TZ evaluation is to examine the extent to which TZ counties and the state of North Carolina have enhanced their capacity to improve the quality of their early childhood systems, including policy, practice, and infrastructure changes needed to support successful implementation of evidence-informed practices. The specific evaluation questions guiding the evaluation are:

- Have communities been able to enhance their capacity to improve the quality of their early childhood systems? How?
- What state and local policy and practice changes in the early childhood system have occurred as the result of the work in the Transformation Zone?
- Have the participating state agencies or local communities strengthened the infrastructure to support the successful implementation of evidence-informed practices?
- What are the benefits of the work in the Transformation Zone?
- What are the unintended consequences?
- If system change has or has not occurred or has been limited, what are the factors influencing this?

EVALUATION METHODS

The TZ evaluation team created a logic model for the initiative and has conducted interviews, focus groups, field observations, an online survey, and document reviews. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with a variety of stakeholders including County Leadership and Implementation Team members, County Implementation Coaches, Strategy Purveyors and local Service Providers, Funders, and administrators from state-level Funders of TZ strategies. Field observations were conducted to examine local and state engagement and processes related to practices, policies, and infrastructure change. An online survey was distributed to community agencies. Documents, such as memoranda of understanding, meeting agendas and notes, and monitoring reports were reviewed. We analyzed data by identifying and coding themes related to study questions, using a modified constant-comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which data are compared with previous findings to understand emergent progress in a dynamic process. Follow-up inquiries to partners and stakeholders were frequent, to verify both accuracy of information received and appropriateness of interpretation.

TRANSFORMATION ZONE COMPONENTS

Several technical assistance, agency, and state and local team components share responsibility for the TZ work: State Leadership Team (SLT), State Implementation Team (SIT), County Leadership Teams (CLT), County Implementation Teams (CIT), Strategy Purveyors (state) and Service Providers (local/regional) for each strategy/group of strategies, Grants Management, NIRN (leadership, administration, and implementation specialists/technical assistance), and the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC). NCPC employs the State Implementation Coach Coordinator and County Implementation Coaches, oversees the ABL Change work, and provides technical assistance related to messaging.

State Teams. The intent of the TZ SLT was to: (1) provide collaborative guidance; (2) serve as a focused, accountable structure for developing, sustaining, and accessing the coordinated efforts in the TZ; and (3) make recommendations that will increase the likelihood of consistent, high-fidelity implementation and coordination of early childhood strategies in all TZ counties. The SIT, consisting of state TZ funding agency administrators, Strategy Purveyors, and Coaches, supports the installation and implementation of strategies, communicates state priorities and policies with county leadership, and shares county perspectives and needs to state leadership.

County Teams. The CLTs, which consist of key early childhood leaders and stakeholders within each county, provide vision and direction to county teams, make decisions, and direct resources to support implementation efforts. The CITs consist of the County Implementation Coach, the literacy coordinator, and community based agency staff. These teams provide structure to support system and capacity development to achieve sustainable, high quality, integrated services.

Strategies. Eight strategies were selected for transforming early childhood systems in the TZ: two family strengthening strategies, four child care quality strategies, and two literacy strategies. Priority for selection included evidence-based programs or approaches that have previously been shown effective in improving outcomes for young children and families. Others were designed to

increase access to services, but were not considered evidence-based programs. The TZ evaluation team was charged with evaluating the effectiveness of the initiative in promoting local and state systems change and not the individual strategies' implementation effectiveness.

Technical Assistance. The TZ utilizes two distinct frameworks for technical assistance: Active Implementation and ABLLe Change. NIRN Implementation Specialists have worked with the TZ since the grant's inception to support Active Implementation processes with TZ counties around the eight strategies. They provide ongoing training and implementation support to all levels of the TZ structure: SIT, CLTs, CITs, Strategy Purveyors, and Implementation Coaches. Consultants from ABLLe Change have provided technical assistance to coaches and county teams related to garnering community support, engaging families, assessing community systems, and enhancing community capacity for change. The Coach Coordinator provides support and reflective supervision of the Implementation Coaches regarding goal setting and planning. The Implementation Coaches lead the communication, planning, convening, and educating of their teams and sustain the team infrastructure and implementation and systems change processes. NCPC supervises the State and County Implementation Coaches, contracts for and supports the ABLLe Change work, and provides technical assistance to counties around communications and messaging.

FINDINGS

Findings included in this report are a synthesis of data gathered by the TZ evaluation team from the April 2014, when data collection began, to September 2015. Organized into component sections (state teams, county teams, strategies, and technical assistance), the findings underscore ways in which early childhood systems and implementation of evidence-based practices are being transformed (successes) and ongoing barriers to transformation (challenges).

State Teams. The TZ SLT last met formally in June 2013, but many state agency leaders and staff have attended SIT and Cross-County meetings. In addition, a subset of the SLT consisting of state TZ funding agency administrators met five times in 2014 and twice in 2015 to address issues and challenges. The SIT was inactive between December 2013 and June 2014; however, it has since reconvened and has met four times in the past year. Some state leaders have also attended SIT meetings. *Successes* related to state teams include: (1) commitment and increased capacity of NCPC related to implementation science and system change, and (2) state leadership engagement related to specific early childhood system issues. *Challenges* include: (1) a disconnect between strategy implementation and county leadership, (2) limited opportunity for feedback and learning between state and local teams, and (3) limited systems change capacity developed at the state level.

County Teams. All four counties have engaged in efforts to act as coalitions for change in their communities. In three of four counties, the Leadership and Implementation Teams have each met regularly to discuss updates, technical assistance related to implementation science and system change, and planning. *Successes* among county teams include: (1) enhanced system awareness, (2) enhanced institutional capacity and data-driven decision-making, (3) identification of and enhanced vision for leadership, (4) enhanced communication facilitated by the coaching role, (5) enhanced county and cross-county relationships, and (6) successful literacy strategy

implementation. Ongoing *Challenges* include: (1) barriers to effective within-county communication, (2) engaging effective leadership, (3) difficulty learning two discrete models for systems change, and (4) disconnection from strategy implementation processes.

Strategies. In September 2014 all strategies were at the initial implementation stage, with literacy strategy progress further along than others. Strategy Purveyors and Service Providers are engaged in managing transitions, starting data systems, and applying improvement cycles. *Successes* linked to strategies include: (1) increased understanding of implementation science, and (2) successful literacy strategy implementation. *Challenges* include: (1) difficulties related to lack of county choices related to strategies, and (2) system capacity overload due to simultaneous implementation of eight strategies.

Technical Assistance. Since the inception of the project, NIRN Implementation Specialists facilitate SIT and Cross-County meetings, attend county team meetings, provide weekly in-person and remote coaching to County Implementation Coaches, and have worked with Strategy Purveyors and Service Providers to troubleshoot problems and articulate strategy models. Since January 2014, faculty from Michigan State University has provided technical assistance on systems change using the ABLe Change Framework. They provide regular remote assistance to County Implementation Coaches and have organized retreats in each of the counties. *Successes* include: (1) enhanced institutional capacity/implementation infrastructure, and (2) enhanced system awareness/change. *Challenges* stem from the difficulty of coordinating two discrete models of technical assistance.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

At the mid-point of the evaluation, our accumulated data highlight the progress made in building system capacities in the TZ, as well as some barriers that have slowed progress to date. In the final 16 months of the project, the evaluation team will conduct focus groups, interviews, and surveys to continue to address study questions about early childhood system capacity, policy, and practice changes in the TZ and to highlight learning related to successes, barriers, and unintended consequences of the work. We will conduct a case study of the literacy strategies to examine structures and processes that have enabled implementation success.

REFERENCES

- Foster-Fishman, P.G., & Watson, E.R. (2011). The ABLe Change Framework: A conceptual and methodological tool for promoting systems change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(3-4), 503-516. doi: 10.1007/s10464-011-9454-x
- Metz, A., & Bartley, L. (2012). Active Implementation Frameworks for program success: How to use implementation science to improve outcomes for children. *Zero to Three Journal*, 32(4), 11-18.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.