

NC Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant

- *Building an Effective Early Childhood System in North Carolina*
- *Promoting Early Learning and Development Outcomes for Children*

North Carolina's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Grant has built on our long history of recognizing that when each child has the opportunity to fulfill his or her potential, we create the best outcomes in education, health and economic well-being for everyone in North Carolina. Through this grant, North Carolina has invested in the parents, teachers, and professionals that shape children's early experiences and environments; has valued and prioritized the families of young children; has supported rural communities; has valued outcomes and broken down silos; and has led the nation and helped advance the early learning field.

The grant provided \$69.9 million to North Carolina from 2012 through 2016 to build and enhance our early learning system to support positive outcomes for young children as they learn and develop. Participating agencies include the Division of Child Development and Early Education, the Division of Public Health, the Department of Public Instruction, and the NC Partnership for Children, as well as many university, community college, local and nonprofit agency partners statewide.

Detailed information about every funded project is available at:

<http://earlylearningchallenge.nc.gov/>

Some highlights of North Carolina's RTT-ELC grant accomplishments include the following:

Supporting a Great Early Learning Workforce

Many of North Carolina's RTT-ELC projects provided new or enhanced professional development and technical assistance opportunities for the early learning workforce including the development and implementation of new courses, enhanced courses at the community college level, mentoring and support for Birth – Kindergarten (B-K) teacher licensure, new online learning opportunities, and T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarships. The grant also provided a Professional Development Bonus Award to qualifying programs to support enhanced workforce development. In addition, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington now offer on-line master's degree programs for the workforce in early childhood leadership and administration.

Specific areas of focus have included leadership development, family engagement, cultural competence, and effective implementation of NC's early learning standards, called the *NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development*, and early childhood curriculum. Investing in the early childhood workforce through this grant has strengthened the quality of teaching and the experiences of parents, which leads to better early learning and development outcomes for young children.

Enhancing the Quality of Early Learning Programs

North Carolina is a national leader with its established child care licensure and quality improvement system, the NC Star Rated License. Several of North Carolina's RTT-ELC funded

projects support future revisions to the licensure system that will further support high-quality child care programs to ensure optimal early learning and development for all young children statewide.

In one key project, the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in partnership with Child Trends, collaborated with the Division of Child Development and Early Education to conduct a validation study of NC's Star Rated License system. This study, to be completed in December 2016, will inform possible changes to further strengthen NC's Star Rated License, including possibly raising standards related to environments, staff qualifications, and family engagement.

In another key project, a multi-state collaboration, led by faculty at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has developed and is testing a new program quality measurement tool, the Early Childhood Quality Improvement Pathway System (EQuIPS). EQuIPS provides a review system of early childhood program performance and quality leading to a program portrait based on information from observations, document review, and interviews. It is anticipated this portrait will be used in varying ways in NC's Star Rated License system and other states' quality rating and improvement systems to help identify pathways for programs to improve experiences for children and families.

Building Community Capacity to Support Children's Learning and Development

The Transformation Zone is an initiative in four of North Carolina's highest need counties in the rural northeastern region (Bertie, Beaufort, Chowan, and Hyde). These counties are building system-wide capacity to improve learning and developmental outcomes for young children. Leadership teams in each county participate in capacity-building activities and receive expert assistance in implementation science to support county work. Each county is also implementing selected strategies, including *Family Connects* (a nurse home visiting program), *Triple P* (a family support program), *Motheread* and *Reach Out and Read* (family literacy programs), and several child care quality improvement strategies.

Key accomplishments relating to the Transformation Zone for North Carolina include: 1) ongoing collaboration of county and state implementation teams, 2) increasing implementation and systems capacity to support and improve programs, 3) ongoing use of data to monitor progress and improve the implementation of literacy and family strengthening strategies, 4) increased engagement of diverse community partners, including families, and 5) collaborative state-county sustainability planning. The Transformation Zone evaluation team has released its first report on the experiences to date of the state and county partners involved in this work and a final report will be released in fall 2016.

Using Assessment to Support Children's Learning and Development

North Carolina has developed and piloted a Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) as part of a broader K-3 Formative Assessment Process and is implementing the assessment statewide. Almost 120,000 children in North Carolina enter kindergarten each year with varying experiences, knowledge, and skills. The K-3 Formative Assessment Process, which includes the Kindergarten Entry Assessment, helps teachers and families gain an ongoing understanding of

children's growth in all five domains of development and learning as a way to help ensure that each child reaches his or her greatest potential. The five domains include language development and communication; cognitive development; approaches to learning; emotional-social development; and health and physical development.

Phase I of implementation of the Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) began in all kindergarten classrooms in the fall of 2015 and included 3 construct progressions. Phase II of implementation of the Kindergarten Entry Assessment is occurring in the fall of 2016. During the first 60 days of the 2016-17 school year, Kindergarten teachers are collecting evidences of learning for all of their students on seven construct progressions, assessing all five domains of development.

In the formative assessment process, teachers collect evidence of learning to guide teaching and learning. The information gathered during the first 60 days of kindergarten creates a snapshot of each child's early learning and development in key areas. Teachers use this understanding, as well as information collected throughout the school year, to meet the specific learning needs of each child. A secure electronic platform stores the collected student information to support sound instructional decision-making. The materials developed to support this process align with both the *NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development* and the *NC Standard Course of Study*.

Using Data to Inform Early Childhood Policy and Programs

Through the grant, North Carolina has launched a new data system to integrate early childhood, public education, health and social services information. By linking data on programs and services for young children across State agencies, North Carolina now has access to more information that can help answer key policy, program and research questions. For the first time, North Carolina can provide distinct counts of the number of children served between and across these early childhood state programs.

Through the NC Early Childhood Integrated Data System (NC ECIDS) users can access reports that provide statewide distinct counts of children across programs, see how many children ages 0-5 are in multiple programs, and which programs are serving NC's four-year-olds. Users can also create their own reports, customizing them by county, program year, or by child demographics.

NC ECIDS is available at:

<https://www.ecids.nc.gov/>