



The Transformation Zone (TZ), supported by N.C.'s Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant, was a system change initiative that aimed to build organizational infrastructure and state and county capacity with the goal of improving outcomes for children so that every child comes to kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. The project was designed to apply lessons from implementation science to effectively implement selected early childhood strategies and support early childhood systems improvements across the state. The set of strategies in the Transformation Zone included a universal home visiting program (Family Connects), a family strengthening strategy (Triple P: Positive Parenting Program), two literacy strategies (Reach Out and Read and Motherread) and several child care quality improvement strategies (Infant Toddler Expansion, North Carolina Babies First, Healthy Social Behavior Project, Child Care Health Consultation). Four rural low-resource counties in northeastern North Carolina were selected to participate in the Transformation Zone: Bertie, Beaufort, Chowan and Hyde counties.

The TZ infrastructure consisted of cross-sector state and county leadership and implementation teams. Leadership teams consisted of leaders who have decision making authority to influence funding and policy changes to remove barriers impeding effective strategy implementation. Implementation teams consisted of intervention managers and staff who are directly engaged in implementation activities to support and sustain full and effective use of the intervention. In addition, implementation team members helped to identify barriers and provide recommendations for policy/practice shifts to leadership teams.

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State and local teams participated in “policy to practice feedback loops” to resolve issues and celebrate successes. State agencies that received funding to implement TZ strategies, including the Division of Child Development and Early Education, Division of Public Health, and the North Carolina Partnership for Children, served as key members of the state leadership and implementation teams. Each county had a full-time coach and cross-sector leadership and implementation teams with representatives from various early childhood agencies to support an effective implementation infrastructure.

County implementation and leadership teams, along with key community stakeholders, also engaged in learning to support community building. Training, using the ABLLe Change Framework, supported system building efforts and the development of county plans to engage diverse voices, particularly those of parents and other service recipients. Teams also received training on how to engage in a systems scan process that supported long-range sustainability planning at the county level.

The state and county leadership and implementation teams were supported by a state and county technical assistance team with expertise in implementation science and systems change, including participation from the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN), state implementation specialists, county coaches, and a coach coordinator with the North Carolina Partnership for Children, as well as support from Dr. Pennie Foster-Fishman of Michigan State University to implement the ABLLe Change Framework. These experts supported local and state teams to:

- Engage in collaborative decision-making to develop/enhance the functioning of the early childhood system
- Support intentional attention to key activities across the implementation process (such as defining the early childhood system vision, evaluating fit of strategies, creating and carrying out detailed plans, developing communication protocols, and reviewing data to inform decision making and improvement)
- Assess individual and organizational capacity to implement strategies and support systems change
- Develop knowledge and skills to support effective implementation and scale-up of strategies

At the state level, NIRN and state implementation specialists worked with state leaders and intervention managers (i.e. purveyors) on the state and implementation teams to facilitate planning and coordination among the various strategies, and also served as a liaison to county teams. At the county level, state implementation specialists and county coaches, supported by a coach coordinator, worked with county teams to support implementation of strategies. Dr. Foster-Fishman led counties through the ABLLe change framework to support system building efforts in each county.

An evaluation team was engaged to conduct a systems-level evaluation to identify the impacts of the work from the Transformation Zone. Through the TZ, North Carolina had the opportunity 1) to better understand the challenges of early childhood system building efforts at the state level and in under-resourced rural counties and 2) to determine the benefit of investing in a set of cross-sector effective early childhood practices

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with intentional support and capacity building from a state team. Lessons learned in the TZ will be used to develop and/or refine early childhood strategies across the state.

Lessons Learned/Considerations

- Assess readiness, capacity, and interest of state and county actors to engage in system change and professional development efforts. Expect variations in levels of readiness, capacity and interest, and work with the most interested partners.
- Provide adequate planning time for state and county actors to define the vision for their early childhood system, to develop a shared understanding of the purpose, goals, and process of the system change effort and fit of proposed strategies.
- Allow time for county and state exploration to identify an appropriate strategy for implementation by assessing need and fit. The assessment of need and fit should be well integrated with and/or be part of the development of a county action plan for the early childhood system and community building efforts.
- Select one 'scale-worthy' strategy (rather than eight) to implement in a Transformation Zone.
- Provide time and training for county stakeholders to conduct a scan of their current system and develop an action plan, including how to support the engagement of diverse voices, to support their vision for their early childhood system.
- Frequently revisit the systems change purpose, goals, and process with all actors (from initiative leaders to technical assistance and county teams) to ensure shared understanding.
- Engage leaders who have influence over policy and funding decisions, as well as knowledgeable managers and stakeholders who understand local culture/processes/procedures.
- Engage an evaluation team and monitoring processes at the start of the initiative to support collection of critical information, help establish measurable accomplishments, and provide appropriate feedback to leaders.
- Make information and the system change process transparent, accessible, and inclusive of actors at both county and state levels.
- Try to build on existing infrastructure/ teams rather than creating new ones. When establishing new teams/infrastructure, allow time for the team to effectively work together (i.e. consider the group development model of forming - storming - norming - performing). Engage leaders in concrete, actionable work early in the process.
- Engaging external assistance is necessary to lead collaborators through the change process and to support individuals and agencies navigating new ways of doing business differently.
- Create multi-agency contracts (and/or MOAs) at the state-level with participating local agencies to ensure agencies understand their roles in the Transformation Zone and their joint ownership and responsibility for implementing strategies.
- Consider boundaries/county lines and the local approach to service provision. Implementing a multi-county/regional initiative can be challenging without an existing regional infrastructure to support implementation.
- Be sensitive to integrating new services into existing services and ensure partners do not feel threatened, especially if the existing services generate county revenue.