

NORTH CAROLINA

RACE TO THE TOP

EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE

**Final Report 1 — Implementation Capacity Impact**

**Activity 1.2:**

**Transformation Zone Support and Capacity Building**

**Date of Report: September 16, 2016**

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- **Introduction**

This report summarizes key successes achieved over four years of the North Carolina Early Learning Challenge Transformation Zone project. Always an ambitious project, the effort resulted in increased implementation knowledge and skill, and program accomplishments and significant systems change at county and state levels. The following report briefly highlights key areas of success.

- **National Implementation Research Network Scope of Work**

A team of up to four full time Implementation Specialists from the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) at UNC Chapel Hill's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute supported state and local actors for the four-year period. The NIRN team was charged with increasing implementation knowledge and capacity at the state and local levels. The scope of work included:

- County:
  - Intensive coaching of County Implementation Coaches (at least one hour weekly)
  - Co-facilitation of County Leadership and Implementation Team meetings to develop local implementation knowledge and skill
  - Brokering connections between state and local actors to address emergent implementation issues
- State:
  - Intensive coaching of the Transformation Zone Coach Coordinator and other North Carolina Partnership for Children staff
  - Convening and facilitating State Implementation Team to develop state implementation knowledge and skill
  - Supporting purveyor and model developers in model development for dissemination
  - Supporting State Leadership Team meetings through agenda development and other support

- **Successes:**

The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Transformation Zone demonstrates that implementation knowledge, skill and capacity, and new forms of collaboration can be developed in the midst of ongoing work to improve school readiness. Specific implementation practices can be adopted and integrated into ongoing systems. State policy and guidance can create an enabling environment for both new programs and new implementation practice to support those programs. Stakeholders at all levels are willing to learn new ways of work and provide constructive feedback. State leaders can make creative changes when relevant data about new challenges and opportunities arise. Existing relationships have been deepened and new relationships developed with long lasting potential for collaboration.

Examples include:

- The development and sustained collaboration of cross sector leadership teams including local partnerships for children, school district leadership, Head Start leaders, faith leaders, and many more. Prior to the ELC-TZ, In no counties were these leaders regularly coming together to focus on county specific early childhood issues and school readiness. Successes fall under two categories: State Impact and County Impact.
  - The development of a collaborative relationship between the Better Beginnings for Bertie’s Children leadership and the County Commission. This intentional effort has resulted in county funding to support efforts to identify and engage families of young children who have unmet need. County data collection indicates low level of awareness and limited use of services while NC Pre-K, Head Start and child care slots go unfilled. The Bertie program aims to close this gap which they have identified as a critical input to increasing school readiness in the county.
- **State Impact**
    - *Increased Workforce Capacity*
      - Cross sector (State Implementation Team) and program specific (e.g. literacy community of practice) groups created opportunities for collective learning and sustained support for increasing Implementation knowledge, skill and capacity.
      - These groups helped to foster new opportunities for collaboration between and among organizations, state agencies and county level teams. For example, participating purveyor organizations saw a great opportunity to reach families with newborns through the Family Connects program and worked to ensure program information was available through the home visiting nurses when that program started.
      - North Carolina Partnership for Children identified an agency Implementation Team of internal staff. The NCPC Implementation Team meets weekly and receives weekly coaching from NIRN staff members. Individual team members have demonstrated increased Implementation knowledge and skill in their application of Implementation Science to the current reorganization within NCPC.
      - In other agencies, workforce gains were more varied. It remains to be seen if a decentralized sector such as early childhood can develop and sustain the envisioned Implementation Specialists, in comparison with the Department of Public

Instruction, where such positions are in place. However, the experience of the ELC TZ may have changed the context such that these roles are more possible than when the project began.

- *Increased Organizational Capacity*
  - North Carolina Partnership for Children invested deeply in building Implementation capacity in its staff and systems, including:
    - Effective integration of the Implementation Coach and Coach Coordinator functions into their agency.
    - Integrating stage based deliverables into contracting (e.g. Literacy).
    - Responsive management of ELC contracts with convening agencies (creative response to local needs).
    - Taking initiative to engage peer agencies in response to county requests (e.g. convening state agencies and leaders to explore consistency of family engagement strategies across funding streams).
    - Systems barriers, like a narrow focus on contract deliverables or resistance to adapt data for county audiences, were highlighted through multi-partner discussions. While not always solved in the ELC TZ, these discussions can inform future contracting and partnership agreements developed by state and county partners.
  - *Increased Purveyor & Technical Assistance Capacity*
    - Several program purveyors actively participated in state level efforts to align their technical assistance with the new structures, relationships and expectations of the ELC TZ. This included developing new implementation informed tools and methods (CCHC, MotherRead), working outside of normal reporting lines to share data (Reach Out and Read, MotherRead, Triple P, Family Connects), and being responsive and creative in the face of novel situations and requests (NC Babies First).
    - Many purveyors demonstrated a desire for collaboration and learning with peer organizations sharing complementary goals and experiences. The State Implementation team met this need and provided a venue for sharing and creative problem solving. Similar approaches can serve future efforts of building good faith and collaboration among disparate partners while allowing space for learning and adaptive problem solving.
    - Responsive and adaptive TA is required when working in rural communities with unique challenges, disparate resource levels and diverse histories. NIRN and NCPC made considerable efforts, with support from Michigan State University colleagues, to understand emergent needs and opportunities and to adapt approaches to collaboration. This resulted in trust, willingness to sustain collaboration and more contextualized approaches. For example, when the Chowan Leadership team struggled to stabilize membership, NIRN adapted the County Capacity assessment approach to work with only the core set of participating leaders. While not the ideal, this approach allowed the group to explore the potential value of the assessment while still getting some actionable data to inform their work. Similarly, NCPC and MSU colleagues have been willing to adapt timelines and format of deliverables, such as sustainability plans, based on local differences while still ensuring a basic focus on long term plans for each locality.

- **County Impact**

- *Increased Workforce Capacity*

- The Transformation Zone project developed new workforce capacity and effectively integrated new staff positions with increased capacity into existing systems.
    - First, four County Implementation Coaches were successfully recruited locally and placed within local agencies. These positions were fully funded and new to each county. Each coach was able to build on their existing skills and interests while undergoing considerable training and coaching to learn and apply new active implementation and ABL Change skills and methods.
    - Given the very limited collaborative experience in these counties around early childhood and the limited human resource base in local social service agencies, it is unlikely that the level of effort required would have been realized without sustained support. As a full time employee, the Implementation Coach was an administrative link, a champion, a problem solver and a strategic thinking and actor.
    - County coaches have used their implementation knowledge, skills and experiences to take over leadership of local capacity building. Coaches received active coaching from NIRN staff throughout the first three years. This coaching evolved over time as the nature of the work evolves through implementation stages. This work took time, patience and willingness to collaborate on all sides. Coaches dedicated significant time to building their skills and are now leading efforts to enhancing implementation practices on the Leadership and Implementation teams.
      - In Hyde County, the Implementation Coach is supporting her fellow IT members to use a specific tool to assess program fit and feasibility in comparison with identified local needs. This exploration work was requested by the county leadership team in support of ongoing strategic planning.
      - In Chowan and Bertie counties, the Coaches are working with local partners to develop shared action plans and aligned progress monitoring plans to ensure efforts begun with ELC funding are embedded and sustained within the local system.
    - The four Transformation Zone counties (Beaufort, Bertie, Chowan and Hyde) created linked County Leadership and Implementation Teams in each county, comprised of cross-sector early childhood professionals. Leadership teams engage the community in articulating and guiding the vision. They then provide the necessary resources (financial, human and administrative) to the implementation team. The implementation team develops the action plan to carry out the vision. Feedback loops provide timely and relevant data between teams that help to inform subsequent actions. Counties were able to develop and sustain these new structures and processes. Issues identified at county level were shared up to state leaders when necessary, such as when funding for half time infant toddler slots was going unused and the state successfully adapted its program guidance to ensure family needs could be met. Guidance to implementation teams based on county priorities, such as increasing parent understanding of the meaning of school readiness, helped the implementation teams set priorities and carry out focused efforts. The teams were able to stabilize membership, develop their knowledge and

use of implementation science, and actively support the Transformation Zone specific strategies.

- The Leadership and Implementation teams were able to adopt and adapt implementation methods that helped them set priorities, identify and respond to challenges and opportunities, and progressively improve their ability to communicate their needs with state partners.
  - Leadership teams in all counties have a better understanding of and appreciation for the implementation infrastructure that must be developed for successful long term implementation of evidence based programs. These teams are taking on the challenge of identifying the resources, workforce and processes necessary to sustain the implementation practices developed through the Transformation Zone, including funding for implementation coaches and documenting team processes in terms of references and strategic plans.
  - Implementation teams in the four counties are able to identify and use implementation tools as new programs are considered, selected and introduced. For example, Bertie County is developing its 'Kid Find' strategy with the Usable Innovations framework and using the implementation stages to plan and support its efforts to link families to services, especially child care, over time.
  - Leadership and Implementation Teams are more actively and regularly using appropriate data concerning implementation processes and outcomes, as well as intervention outputs and outcomes, to monitor progress and take action to improve results. For example, Triple P service data illustrated a gap between providers trained and those delivering the service to families. This challenge has been recognized and prioritized by two county teams who have included the strategy in their strategic plans.
  - County leaders are better consumers of the array of programs available to them to respond to local context. Ongoing sustainability planning demonstrated that counties are considering fit and feasibility as well as need when considering where to invest time and effort in resource mobilization. They were also able to 'let go' of some programs that were not effective in the context, allowing them to spend their time looking for more locally responsive alternatives.
- *Increased Collaboration*
- Strategies that gave county stakeholders more explicit roles – e.g. literacy, CCHC and Triple P – from the beginning have resulted in more frequent identification and response to implementation challenges and building county support and ownership. Programs funded through state or regional partners without the expectation or support for county involvement had varied success, were largely not prioritized by county stakeholders and did not result in broad local support. When local teams were empowered and given clear roles in supporting practice change to align with state programs, there was great buy-in and value for the state program.
  - Implementation provided a language that could be used across separate systems. For example, implementation is understood to comprise several stages – exploration, installation, initial implementation and full implementation. All early childhood stakeholders (e.g. health departments, local Smart Start Partnerships, school systems, etc.) have experience with the challenges of effective installation,

that is, putting in place the necessary resources, staff and support before initiating a new program. This common language allowed disparate partners to share common experiences and collectively develop solutions. This in turn reinforced their ability and willingness to collaboratively approach shared challenges.

- A significant investment was made in external support for implementation capacity building and coaching at county and state levels. The County Capacity Assessment (CCA) tool assesses the impact of this support in three domains – Leadership Commitment, System Alignment and Action Planning. The CCA is an externally administered self-assessment completed by Leadership team members. The compiled scores indicate systems strengths and help to illuminate areas for improvement, leading to action planning. For example, the lack of a shared approach to selecting new programs was a common gap in all counties. Now, with counties collectively developing long term sustainability plans, collaborative processes for decision making are being developed and codified in leadership team terms of reference.
- While not all counties consistently participated through the entire project period, counties showed significant progress over time. The results (see appendix) show that such investments, carefully scoped and focused, can lead to sustained implementation practice change.

**Appendix: Results of the County Capacity Assessments per County as of September 2016**



