



RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE (RTT-ELC) GRANT

District of Columbia | Executive Summary – 2013

Introduction

This round of the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) program could not have come at a better moment for the District of Columbia (the District). The District is six years into a comprehensive school reform effort that emphasizes early childhood education as a lynchpin strategy. As a result of this focus, the District is first in the nation in providing universal access to high-quality public Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) programs for all three- and four-year olds. The District enjoys an unparalleled sense of urgency around its school reform effort, and is poised to leverage the significant investments already made in early childhood education to implement an ambitious early learning reform plan.

As a city-state and the nation’s capital, the District is unique among RTT-ELC applicants. Its size, governance and reform structures enable reform at the state level that can reach individual programs, classrooms and children efficiently and effectively. In the District, RTT-ELC funds will go “further faster” than in any other state. Already an incubator for innovative education reform, the District will demonstrate that exceptional outcomes are possible with a plan that is backed by a strong reform agenda, political will, and aligned leadership and support.

Early Learning and Development Reform Agenda and Goals

In April 2012, the Mayor released his Early Success Framework, outlining elements of the District’s shared vision for thriving children, families, and communities. This framework has guided the work of the range of players in the District’s early childhood community, both individually and collectively. In order to realize the Early Success vision, the District seeks to implement the plan proposed below in response to the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge.

The District’s RTT-ELC reform plan is built on **five key pillars** critical to a high-quality early learning and development system and to achieving outcomes for young children and their families:

- 1. QRIS expansion and enhancement** to support high quality early learning and development programs.
- 2. Infant & toddler capacity** with a focus on the people and places that support the healthy development of the District’s youngest children and their families especially for those most at risk.
- 3. Health and early childhood education linkages** to address the needs of the whole child.
- 4. Pre-K to 3rd grade approaches** to ensure that all children have opportunities for early success at the critical 3rd grade benchmark.
- 5. Data integration** to promote continuous quality improvement across the early learning and development system.

The District is committed to making focused investments on strategies within these five reform pillars in order to realize the following **ambitious yet achievable goals** for improving program quality, improving

outcomes for children with the greatest needs, and closing the educational gaps between those children and their peers:

Goal	2013	2017
Increase the number of children with high needs enrolled in Gold level early learning and development programs	2,675	4,626
Increase the number of Gold level subsidized childcare programs	108	361
Percentage of license-exempt public Pre-K programs that voluntarily participate in the QRIS, Going for the Gold.		80%
Increase the number of early learning educators who have credentials	2,023	3,313
Increase the number of children who have a full EPSDT screening	4,705	7,430
Increase third grade proficiency in reading and math in our high needs wards, as measured by the PARCC multi-state assessment.	Baseline to be set in 2015.	

These goals will be achieved through implementation of core projects and focused investments that address all priority areas within the RTT-ELC. Taken together, this work encompasses a highly effective and achievable reform agenda that will have measurable and positive impact on the lives of young children and families in the nation’s capital.

Developing and Adopting a Common, Statewide Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System

The RTT-ELC will enable the District to expand and enhance the current Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) through several core projects that will increase participation in the QRIS, strengthen measures of quality, and target supports for quality improvement. These efforts will also ensure access to high-quality, accountable programs for children with the greatest needs.

(1) Increased participation in QRIS

The District will require all licensed early learning and development programs to participate in the QRIS, *Going for the Gold*. The DC Public Schools has agreed that all of its public Pre-K programs will participate in the QRIS, while the Public Charter Schools will be encouraged to pursue a voluntary pathway to Silver and Gold. Finally, the District will target quality improvement supports in communities that are identified as having children with the greatest development risk. As a result of these efforts, additional high needs children will be served in Gold rated programs.

(2) Rating and monitoring Early Learning and Development Programs

The District’s QRIS *Going for the Gold* has three levels: Bronze (licensing), Silver (pending accreditation) and Gold (accredited by NAEYC or NAFCC), and while the three level structure will not change, the standards will be strengthened in several ways. An Environmental Rating Scale will be added to the standards at the Bronze level and CLASS will be added at the Silver and Gold levels. Particular attention will be paid to standards within Silver to better enable programs to move from Bronze to Silver. Right now the Silver level denotes “pending accreditation” - which is too big a leap for many programs and is

not comprehensive enough to enable programs to easily “land there” when they meet standards above the Bronze level but are not yet ready to pursue accreditation. The District will enhance and expand the integrity, monitoring and reliability of the QRIS, in doing so, the visibility and impact of the QRIS will be more apparent to providers and families

(3) Promoting access to high quality Early Learning and Development Programs for children with greatest needs

The District’s universal Pre-K program for all three- and four-year old children in the city has resulted in dramatic increases in the participation of children with high needs in high quality Pre-K. While the District’s plan will continue support for continuous quality improvement in state Pre-K, the District believes that increasing the quality of programs serving infants and toddlers is critical for closing the achievement gap. Currently, the District provides childcare subsidies without a waiting list for all families with children under 250% of the federal poverty level, and the Mayor recently invested an additional \$11million in high quality infant and toddler programs. That money is fueling an increase in child care reimbursements for our youngest children, based on the three QRIS rating levels. These new resources help to support quality and the sustainability of programs that exclusively serve children who are receiving a subsidy. RTT-ELC funds will be allocated to increase the subsidized childcare reimbursement rate for children in foster care and homeless based on a rate enhancement currently provided to children who qualify for early intervention services. Once we have enhanced our QRIS, these higher subsidies will only be available to programs at the Silver and Gold levels to ensure that these very high need children and families have access to the highest quality care. In addition to these strategies, careful tracking of access to high-quality childcare and Pre-K in our highest need Wards (5, 7, and 8) will be a core focus of the RTT-ELC work. The District will also continue its current deep investments in high quality universal publicly funded Pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Professional development for infant and toddler educators will also be enhanced by developing a cadre of Infant-Toddler Specialists to provide coaching and mentoring and support continuous quality improvement plans for child care programs, with a focus on moving Bronze programs in Wards 5, 7, and 8 to the Silver or Gold levels.

(4) Validating the effectiveness of state tiered Quality Rating and Improvement Systems:

A QRIS Advisory Committee of experts and stakeholders from the District’s early learning and development programs will inform the development of an independent Validation Study. The study will proceed in two phases. Phase One will set appropriate levels for each QRIS tier. The District has baseline data on the CLASS on a sample of state Pre-K programs in DCPS and public charter schools, and ECERS and ITERS data on a sample of programs in the current QRIS. Phase Two of the study will assess the alignment of QRIS ratings with children’s progress –identifying which components of the QRIS are most closely associated with children’s progress and outcomes.

Promoting Early Learning and Development Outcomes for Children

(1) Developing and using statewide, high-quality Early Learning and Development Standards

The District has a strong track record in the development and use of early learning standards and has chosen this as a continued focus within RTT-ELC. In 2008, the District worked with national experts to develop and adopt Early Learning and Development Standards (DCELS) that included all domains of child development and were aligned with the state's K-3 standards. The District's adoption in 2010 of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) resulted in additional work to fully align the ELDS with the CCSS. As part of the RTT-ELC work, the District will continue to refine the DCELS to ensure that they guide the work of early childhood learning and development professionals in all settings. In particular, work will be done to create a Standards Entry Points manual that will guide differentiated learning that meets the needs of young English Language Learners and children with special developmental needs and to train all levels of professionals (teachers, principals, administrators) on the material. A comprehensive program to engage parents in understanding and using DCELS will also be developed and implemented.

The District will also, as part of its involvement in a cross-state consortium, identify Common Essential Standards (CES) that are most predictive of school readiness. These standards will be highlighted in a revised version of the DCELS, and training on the use of the CES will be provided for all early childhood learning and development professionals. This cross-state collaboration will also yield a set of K-3 School Readiness standards that the District will use to enhance the CCSS at the early elementary level, adding to the continuity between early childhood and early elementary and sustaining the gains made in reducing the readiness gap for Children with High Needs.

(2) Supporting effective uses of Comprehensive Assessment Systems

The District has made significant progress on building a comprehensive assessment system that can work to organize information about the context and process of young children's learning and development in order to inform program and policy decisions. The use of valid reliable tools such as the ITERS and ECERS environmental ratings scale and the CLASS are an important enhancement to the QRIS by providing objective measures of quality at each level of the three tiers. The District currently conducts an ERS study on a sample of subsidized child care centers each year and supports the use of the CLASS assessment within DCPS and public charter schools. Formative assessments are utilized across public pre-K programs. The District will build on these strengths in several key ways. Child Care providers will be trained on use of a formative assessment aligned to the DCELS in order to provide track children's progress, and as previously noted, the use of a program quality assessments will be expanded for all programs participating in the QRIS.

(3) Identifying and addressing the health, behavioral health and developmental needs of children with greatest needs to improve school readiness

In order to truly improve outcomes for young children and their families, it is critical to take a whole child approach that includes attention to all domains of child development. The Mayor's Early Success Framework represents that District's commitment to this comprehensive approach to early learning and development. One of the framework's four key components is social-emotional, physical, developmental, and mental health. Within this focused investment area, we propose to enhance and strengthen our

commitment to Help Me Grow, a national evidence-based model for centralizing information and facilitating physician and community outreach. Help Me Grow staff will provide outreach to pediatricians, child care providers, evidence-based home visitors, and health and human service case workers to support standardized developmental screening and early detection. It will also include referral to a central access point for connecting children and their families to services and care coordination, and for connecting pediatricians to psychiatric resources.

The District has one of the highest rates of insured children in the country, and is working to ensure that all children enrolled in Medicaid receive appropriate and timely EPSDT services. RTT-ELC funds will support the Department of Health Care Finance to collect well-child visit data in a format which enables them to track compliance with the EPSDT requirements in Medicaid. Funds will also help build on the District's strong home visiting system by undertaking an analysis on how the District can use Medicaid dollars to expand home visiting services.

A Great Early Childhood Education Workforce

(1) Developing a Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework and a progression of credentials

The District has a Workforce Knowledge and Competency Framework, DC Professionals Receiving Opportunities and Support (DC PROS) that outlines a set of expectations for Early Childhood Educators in terms of what they should know and be able to do. The District's plan will engage the higher education community to ensure that all professional development programs are aligned with DCPROS and result in college credits that can be used for AA, BA and Masters level career pathways. The District's Early Childhood Higher Education Collaborative – a consortium of all the higher education institutions that offer degrees in early childhood education – came together to help meet the supply of BA teachers needed in the District's universal Pre-K program. The Higher Education Collaborative will be engaged again to develop a high-quality and effective infant and toddler workforce. To this end, the consortium, supported by QRIS staff at OSSE, will develop articulation agreements between higher education programs, so that all Child Development Associate (CDA) programs are credit-bearing toward an AA or BA. The consortium will also develop a process to offer college credit for professional development offerings.

Many of the available teacher training programs and professional development opportunities in the District are oriented toward preschoolers and early elementary age children, with less attention to the unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers. To address this need the District will contract with the Center for the Child Care Workforce to undertake a review of the current curriculum offerings within higher education to assess alignment with DCPROS and to ensure that there is sufficient content to train high quality infant-toddler care providers. This review of current curricula will support the Higher Education Collaborative in making the necessary changes in course offering and content aligned to the District's most pressing workforce development needs.

(2) Supporting Early Childhood Educators in improving their knowledge, skills and abilities

As mentioned above, the District will hire and train a cadre of Infant-Toddler Specialists as a core component of the professional development system for infant-toddler professionals in the District. The Infant-Toddler Specialists will be trained in PITC, ITERS and the Strengthening Families Initiative and will

be responsible for a.) engaging all infant-toddler professionals in understanding what high-quality infant and toddler care looks like and what it takes to provide high quality infant and toddler care; b.) developing and providing opportunities for all infant and toddler teachers to develop skills in working with children who have developmental delays or disabilities, who are homeless or who are involved in the child welfare system; and c.) providing targeted and tailored technical assistance and professional development to a cohort of infant and toddler programs that are ready to move from Bronze to Silver or from Silver to Gold. In addition, the Infant-Toddler Specialists will provide ongoing support for Continuous Quality Improvement for infant and toddler programs that provide subsidized childcare and will have a representative on the Home Visiting Council to facilitate linkages, coordination, and peer-support.

Measuring Outcomes and Progress

(1) Understanding the status of children's learning and development at kindergarten entry

The District will build on its current efforts to measure kindergarten readiness by working with a consortium of ten states to develop a formative assessment of the Essential Domains of School Readiness under the Enhanced Assessment Grant (EAG) Program from the U.S. Department of Education. The District will work as part of this consortium to design an assessment based on common standards, and will pilot the assessment starting in 2015. A working group comprised of teachers and leaders from DCPS and public charter schools will inform the consortium's development of the assessment and the District's implementation strategy. The results of the KEA will drive policy and program improvements, inform instruction at the classroom level, and provide families with information about their children's progress. The assessment will be ready for full implementation in the 2016-2017 school year.

(2) Building an early learning data system to improve instruction, practices, services and policies

The District will create an Early Learning Data System, building on the foundation of our existing State Longitudinal Education Data system (SLED) in order to manage and use the data to improve quality improvement of the District's birth to five system and look at children's progress and outcomes over time. The data system will also integrate health and human services information where appropriate.

Using data in SLED and the Early Learning Data system, OSSE will regularly generate information that is timely, relevant, and accessible and that all early learning and development programs and Early Childhood Educators to continuously improve, make key decisions, and inform parents and other community stakeholders. Finally, as part of the District's plan, grants will be made available to early learning and development programs to partner with researchers to use data to support program and policy improvements.

Creating Preschool through Third Grade Approaches to Sustain Improved Early Learning Outcomes through the Early Elementary Grades

With universal access to Pre-K, the District's public education system is truly a P-12, rather than a K-12 system – with the great majority of Pre-K programs being delivered within elementary schools. As part of the plan for Pre-K to Third grade approaches, the District will support focused work and interventions in

Wards 5, 7 and 8, through the creation of Early Learning Neighborhood Coalitions as well as through targeted investments in evidence-based strategies that support early learning and development from preschool through 3rd grade.

(1) Develop stand-alone K-3 standards for school readiness to enhance the CCSS in early elementary grades
The District will develop K-3 stand-alone standards in the Essential Domains of School Readiness that are not addressed by the CCSS, in particular Social Emotional Development and Approaches to Learning. This work will be informed by the work of North Carolina and the EAG consortium to develop high-level claims on the constructs that are most predictive of achievement, our existing standards and alignment, and the learning progressions that will be the basis for the EAG K-3 formative assessment.

(2) Build out the EAC K-3 formative assessment to include a Pre-K formative assessment
To further support the development of a P-3rd system and to monitor the status of children's learning in the important years prior to kindergarten, the District will extend the assessment to be created as a part of the EAG consortium described above downward so it can be used in classrooms serving three- and four-year olds.

(3) Create Early Learning Neighborhood Coalitions in six target neighborhoods in Wards 5, 7 and 8
If the District is to truly see measurable improvements in the number of high quality programs serving children with high needs it is critical to target resources to the part of our community that can benefit most. The District has contracted with the UCLA Center on Children and Families to implement the Early Development Instrument (EDI) in the spring of 2014. Results of the EDI will be used to identify target neighborhood clusters within our three highest-need wards in order to engage with community stakeholders to form Early Learning Neighborhood Coalitions that will work together to access additional supports and services for providers, schools, children and families. In the target neighborhoods, the District proposes to scale successful family engagement, health, and behavioral health supports to schools.

(4) Offer opportunities to all schools and CBOs within the Early Learning Neighborhood Coalition clusters to receive additional supports to improve early learning outcomes
All schools and community-based organizations within each cluster selected to form an Early Learning Neighborhood Coalition will be eligible for funding to provide additional supports to teachers, administrators, children and their families in support of the goals defined in the Coalition plans to respond to the EDI data.

(5) Provide access to early childhood behavioral health supports in the five neighborhood clusters that are selected as target areas
The funding from RTT-ELC to expand Healthy Futures (mental health consultation in child care), Project LAUNCH, the Primary Project and Help Me Grow will be targeted to early learning programs, schools and community-based organizations in the target neighborhoods in Wards 5, 7, and 8.