

Taking on the Challenge: Building a Strong Foundation for Early Learning

Early Learning Challenge Summary Report

Executive Summary

Picture children in three early learning classrooms.

Picture them having vastly different learning experiences.

Picture directors making decisions based on disconnected standards and funding streams.

Now envision State agencies creating a systems-level response to quality.

Now envision ALL children entering kindergarten ready to learn.

The Early Learning Challenge (ELC) program awarded more than \$1 billion in four-year grants to 20 States to implement comprehensive and cohesive high-quality early learning systems that support young children with high needs and their families. Congress made this unprecedented investment in early learning because the research is clear that children who enter kindergarten ready to succeed are more likely to read by 3rd grade and thrive in high school and beyond.

A key lever in making these improvements was the enhancement of States' Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). A QRIS is designed to measure, rate, and dissemination information about the quality of the early learning and development programs that participate in the QRIS. Through ELC, States worked across agencies to improve, or in some cases, reinvent their QRIS.

This report summarizes the progress ELC States made since the program began in 2012. It includes selected examples of key initiatives States undertook to create a comprehensive system of high-quality programs for young children and their families. Specifically, it looks at States' efforts to refine their QRIS; examine progress elements (including early learning standards, screenings, and assessment systems); engage and support families; support the early learning workforce; enhance early childhood data systems; and foster community connections. The content was drawn from States' ELC Annual and Final Performance Reports.

As a result of the efforts States have undertaken, it can now be said that more children with high needs are enrolled in high-quality programs and more programs participate in the States' QRIS.

- The number of programs that participate in their States' QRIS increased by 92 percent, from 37,630 programs to nearly 72,000 programs by 2016.
- More than 14,600 programs moved up into the top tiers of their QRIS, an increase of 162 percent. By 2016, nearly 24,000 programs were in the top tiers of their States' QRIS.
- More children with high needs are enrolled in programs and services that are in the top tiers of their QRIS.
 - In 2016, more than a quarter million children were enrolled in high-quality programs

that accepted child care subsidies through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), an increase of 101 percent.

- o More than 300,000 children were enrolled in high-quality State-funded preschool programs in 2016, an increase of 221 percent.
- o Nearly a quarter million children were enrolled in high-quality Early Head Start and Head Start programs in 2016, an increase of 175 percent.

States made progress in developing and strengthening their comprehensive early learning and development systems.

- States improved program quality by providing technical assistance, professional development opportunities, scholarships, merit awards, and grants.
- Families learned about the value and availability of high-quality early learning programs and services through media campaigns, websites, parent cafés, and other strategies.
- States enhanced their early learning standards and aligned them with program standards that were adopted across agencies.
- States addressed the importance of developmental screenings. Over the course of the grant, the number of children who received regularly scheduled development screening increased by 32 percent, to nearly 775,000 children.
- Most States enhanced their existing kindergarten entry assessment (KEA) or implemented new KEAs to measure children's progress at the beginning of kindergarten. Others developed new tools or adapting commercially developed tools for use as their KEA.
- States provided families with information about activities to support their children's development. They developed culturally appropriate program standards for family engagement and trained educators to engage and support families.
- States aligned professional development requirements with early learning and development standards, and they strengthened the workforce through professional development opportunities, career ladders, enhanced coursework, and improved workforce registries.
- States built integrated data systems to streamline data collection and reporting, minimize data duplication, and enable programs and stakeholders to make data-driven decisions and programmatic improvements.
- States empowered local communities to improve opportunities for children and families at the community level.

States used the ELC program to make advancements and drive positive changes in their early learning and development systems, often in the face of significant challenges. Other States are benefiting from these experiences and lessons as they work on improving their own systems.

And the work continues. Every year a new set of children gets ready to enter kindergarten. So, States continue to find ways to answer critical questions, address complex challenges, and implement innovative solutions to ensure that their early learning systems evolve and improve.

States continue this work with the enduring vision that all young children will have a strong foundation for success.