

Executive Summary

For the reporting year, please provide a summary of your State's (1) accomplishments, (2) lessons learned, (3) challenges, and (4) strategies you will implement to address those challenges.

In January 2013, the State of North Carolina inaugurated a new Governor, Pat McCrory, and North Carolina's Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grant successfully transitioned under new leadership. Following inauguration, the Office of the Governor named a new project director for the grant, who also serves as the Early Childhood Policy Advisor to the Governor and the Executive Director for the NC Early Childhood Advisory Council. The Office of the Governor also placed the overall administration and fiscal management of the Early Learning Challenge grant with the Division of Child Development and Early Education in the NC Department of Health and Human Services. During 2013, the Office of the Governor also reconstituted the appointments to the NC Early Childhood Advisory Council, which will commence meeting in early 2014.

Throughout this executive transition, progress in Year 2 in North Carolina's Early Learning Challenge grant was strong. The Office of the Governor remained committed to the stability of the grant and the grant management processes, staffing, and contracts in place. This allowed the projects and activities funded by the grant to continue to make substantial progress, including the following:

NC's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS): This multi-agency collaborative project is building a data system that integrates high-quality education, health and social service information from participating state agencies in order to better inform early childhood policies and programs that ultimately support better outcomes for children and families. The ECIDS will link to North Carolina's longitudinal educational data system, P-20W (Pre-K to age 20/workforce). In 2013, ECIDS leadership and staff defined a data governance structure for implementation in 2014, gathered stakeholder input, developed business and technology requirements for the system, developed plans for implementing a unique child identifier for use in participating programs and continued to generate a collaborative understanding and commitment to the project among many agency leaders, staff and participants.

In addition, the North Carolina Partnership for Children is working with all of the local Smart Start partnerships statewide to establish a set of common outcomes and implement a data system that provides high-quality Smart Start data that will link to the ECIDS.

The NC Division of Child Development and Early Education is also making progress in establishing a streamlined, enhanced early childhood workforce data system and online portal for the child care community to improve data collection and link to the ECIDS.

Transformation Zone: North Carolina's Transformation Zone initiative is a multi-agency, state and local collaboration focused on four selected counties in the northeastern region of the state that is rural and high need (Beaufort, Bertie, Chowan and Hyde). In 2013, intensive work with state and local stakeholders supported the initiation of eight targeted intervention strategies and the building of implementation and system enhancement capacity. The eight strategies include family strengthening using the Triple P model, nurse home visiting, literacy, and high-quality child care, with a focus on expanding high-quality care for infants and toddlers, providing health and development consultation, and providing training and technical assistance for supporting healthy social and emotional development of young children.

Each of the four selected counties established a county implementation team, which added to the existing infrastructure of county leadership teams, as well as state leadership and state implementation teams. Four county coaches and a coach coordinator were hired to support early childhood systems change efforts and

support local teams in implementing the interventions. Intensive technical assistance was provided by the National Implementation Research Network and State Implementation Specialists to build local and state capacity in applied implementation frameworks and assessing county capacity to support high-quality implementation of the eight targeted strategies

NC's Star Rated License (TQRIS): North Carolina has a mature TQRIS with many projects funded by the Early Learning Challenge grant supporting future revisions, as well as expansion of participation of early learning programs. A key project is a Validation Study that is underway, conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Validation Study is designed to provide information about how best to revise NC's Star Rated License so that the tiers more meaningfully differentiate levels of quality in early learning programs that correspond to children's growth and development. Phase 1 of the study was conducted in 2013.

Another key project is the development and pilot testing of a new program quality measurement tool that addresses critical aspects of program quality related to children's outcomes and is specifically suited for use in a revised TQRIS in North Carolina and elsewhere. This project is led by faculty at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, working collaboratively with faculty at the University of Delaware and the University of Kentucky.

Other projects provided new professional development, certification and licensure opportunities for the early learning workforce that support higher TQRIS standards and support for quality enhancement to move programs to attain the highest star ratings. Also, North Carolina's Head Start programs are providing coaching, mentoring and technical assistance to non-Head Start early learning programs to strengthen family engagement activities through regional Head Start hubs in anticipation of enhanced family engagement standards in a revised TQRIS.

To promote increased participation in NC's Star Rated License, technical assistance and mini-grants were provided in 2013, though the percentage of programs already participating is quite high because North Carolina's TQRIS is mature and built into the state licensing system. In addition, the North Carolina Partnership for Children convened a series of "Faith Summits" in 2013 in several locations across the state to engage faith leaders to raise awareness of and commitment to high-quality early learning programs to increase the number of faith-based child care sites in the NC Star Rated License system, which is one area where growth in participation is possible.

NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development: In 2013, North Carolina completed and widely distributed the North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development, a revised publication of early learning and development standards for children birth to age five. The Early Learning Challenge grant ensured the development of a course on Foundations in 2013 to support the early childhood workforce in its understanding and use of the standards, and efforts continue to develop strategies to ensure that Foundations is embedded in North Carolina's early learning and development programs.

K-3 Assessment: North Carolina is developing a K-3 Formative Assessment, including an annual Kindergarten Entry Assessment that is a developmentally appropriate individualized formative assessment that addresses all five domains of learning and development in the NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development. The K-3 Formative Assessment will provide K-3 teachers a more complete picture of the whole child and data to inform daily instructional practices to help meet the needs of every child. Assessment development proceeded throughout 2013, with pilot testing scheduled to begin in the 2014-15 school year.

In addition, North Carolina's grant is funding the FirstSchool model in two selected high-need counties to strengthen the use of assessment to promote high-quality instruction in Pre-K through 3rd grade to produce

equitable outcomes for low-income students in those counties. This project is led by researchers with the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As North Carolina moves into Year 3, reflecting on lessons learned, communication continues to be a challenge in that it is difficult to ensure that key stakeholders have access to the level of information they need and that information about such a wide array of projects is available to multiple audiences. Grant staff are developing a web site to be released in early 2014 and are planning additional communication strategies, based on results of a survey that will be conducted in 2014. One strategy may include a State grant partners meeting that will be an opportunity for grant partners leading and implementing projects to come together, share more about their projects and network, and hear from agency leaders about the impact of their projects on systems building efforts across the State. In addition, the grant monitoring process continues to be enhanced to both ensure that projects are making expected progress and to collect detailed information about each project to be reported regularly and shared among grant partners.

Also, reflecting on Year 2, the Transformation Zone work continues to be one of the most important—and most challenging—efforts in NC’s Early Learning Challenge grant. Through this initiative, North Carolina’s grant leaders and partners are trying to learn implementation science principles, apply those principles, work more collaboratively, and do things differently. The team has realized during this past year the importance of coordination of the Transformation Zone initiative, to strengthen the communication across various partners and to facilitate problem-solving as needed. The goal is also to learn from the Transformation Zone in real-time, as much as possible, to continue to refine our strategies and their implementation at the local and state level. Thus, in 2013 North Carolina developed an RFP for an evaluation that would be developmental and formative, with an expectation that the evaluators would share information regularly with the Transformation Zone leadership. The implementation of this evaluation will help further strengthen the work in 2014 and 2015.

In summary, North Carolina’s Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grant successfully transitioned to a new administration in 2013 and continued its important work to strengthen the state’s early childhood system. Communication and coordination across the 18 projects are challenges, and the grant management team has implemented strategies to address these challenges. The Transformation Zone has offered an opportunity for multiple individuals at the county and state levels to learn more about implementation science and think together about how to apply the concepts of implementation science. The multiple projects, collectively, are aimed to support early care and education, health and family strengthening for North Carolina’s young children and their families.