

## Executive Summary

*Please provide a brief summary of accomplishments, challenges, and lessons learned across the reform areas.*

California's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) implements a unique approach that builds upon our local and statewide successes to create sustainable capacity at the local level and addresses the geographic and cultural diversity of California. We believe this approach best meets the needs of our early learners, with a focus on those with the highest needs. To achieve its ambitious goal, California is using the majority of the funding to support the development and expansion of successful local quality improvement efforts that are focused on improved outcomes for children with high needs by implementing local Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). Approximately 74 percent of the grant funding is being spent at the local level to support a voluntary network of 17 Regional Leadership Consortia (Consortia) in 16 counties. Each consortium is led by an established organization that is already operating or was developing a QRIS or quality improvement system (QIS) and allocating local resources to the efforts. Nearly 1.9 million children or 70 percent of children under five in California are represented by the 16 counties.

In addition, California is using a portion of the RTT-ELC grant funds to make several one-time investments in state capacity via nine projects. These investments range from supporting the professional development of home visiting program staff to enhancing the California Department of Social Services Community Care Licensing Division Web site to facilitating the coordination and alignment for three additional child development course content areas across the community college system. Grant monies will also fund a contractor to conduct the required evaluation to validate the effectiveness of the Consortia QRISs and the Three Common Tiers they have agreed to implement. Many of these additional projects are targeted at supporting the Consortia but also provide additional resources for the state as a whole. The California Department of Education (CDE) is the RTT-ELC lead agency and staff members in the Child Development Division (CDD) serve as the core of the RTT-ELC Implementation Team (Implementation Team) that provides overall grant administration, project monitoring, technical assistance, and support for the Consortia.

During the first year of the grant, California moved forward in multiple areas while also encountering some challenges and several lessons learned across the following five federal RTT-ELC reform areas:

1. Successful State Systems
2. High-Quality, Accountable Programs (QRIS)
3. Promoting Early Learning and Development Outcomes for Children
4. A Great Early Childhood Education Workforce
5. Measuring Outcomes and Progress

## Accomplishments

The following are highlights of accomplishments achieved in key areas:

- **Governance Structures and Leadership**  
Both locally and at the state, progress was made on the Governance Structures. Representatives from the Governor's Administration (Department of Finance, Department of Social Services, and State Board of Education) were included in all

Consortia Meetings and kept abreast of major developments. In addition to the stakeholder work, Consortia appointed QRIS administrators and key staff; developed and established grant management and operational design; developed scopes of work, budgets, and initiated the contracting process; and drafted Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to solidify partner organizations' commitments and partnerships. All Consortia members demonstrated leadership and strong commitment during the first year of RTT-ELC by sharing sample documents, providing feedback, and actively participating in all RTT-ELC workgroups (Definitions, Evaluation, Hybrid Matrix, and Rating and Monitoring Methodology) convened by the Implementation Team in 2012.

- **Quality Continuum Framework (Framework)/Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS)**

The Consortia, along with the Implementation Team, made significant progress in California's Framework development including finalizing the Three Common Tiers across all the Consortia, moving to a hybrid system, streamlining the number of elements on which to be rated – “the few and powerful”, and creating the corresponding Quality Improvement and Professional Development Pathways (Pathways).

The Consortia solicited local community feedback on the hybrid model by engaging them numerous times, which built consensus and support for the streamlined Three Common Tiers as well as the locally determined tiers. Many consortia stated their excitement with the end product, the RTT-ELC Quality Continuum Framework Consortia Hybrid Matrix with Three Common Tiers (Hybrid Matrix or TQRIS), and were pleased that local stakeholders could see their feedback reflected in the creation of a “more solid, practical TQRIS.”

- **Stakeholder Engagement and Building of Local Consortia**

The Consortia are engaging a broad array of stakeholders in the introduction of TQRIS and in the development of their local TQRIS. Consortia are proud of the strong participation in their community stakeholder meetings, focus groups, surveys, and planning team efforts, all of which allowed them to garner input on program elements and potential opportunities and impacts for their communities. They convened extensive and inclusive community consortium meetings and brought together all the stakeholders who operate existing quality enhancement programs, providers and parents who use those programs, and other community agencies.

Consortia expressed that the ongoing full Consortia meetings and regional and/or local level meetings were extremely valuable. They provided added clarity from the state and federal governments as well as opportunity for Consortia consensus decisions, and, more importantly, consortia have shared these communications with their local stakeholders. They included local early learning and early childhood leadership to review the RTT-ELC grant vision, scope, proposed program quality elements, and requirements. The collaborative work conducted to develop a TQRIS with Three Common Tiers has reinvigorated local collaborative and associated workgroups. In addition, consortia have actively increased involvement to include representatives from more unique partners such as business community members (e.g. the Southern California Gas Company and the San Diego Economic Development Corporation), the League of Women Voters, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

- **Communication Strategies and Community Outreach**

The Consortia and the Implementation Team worked on multiple initial communication strategies. This included developing the RTT-ELC Fact Sheet,<sup>1</sup> meeting with Legislative staff to brief them on RTT-ELC, highlighting RTT-ELC via presentations at state and local conferences, developing Web sites, and developing logos. Some consortia contracted with other agencies to develop a brand presence and coordinate marketing and sustainability strategies. Other consortia developed logos specifically for their TQRIS initiative.

- **Local QRIS Implementation**

Besides the significant progress made in the area of the Hybrid Matrix, progress was made at the local level in developing local TQRIS databases; outreach and engagement of sites; launching orientation sessions and communication regarding the TQRIS; conducting program and classroom baseline assessments based on the TQRIS; launching initial training and technical assistance (T&TA); fully integrating of local quality improvement and workforce development funding streams; and forging relationships with institutes of higher education, with expanded course offerings being explored.

Over half of the Consortia reported moving forward with their local RTT-ELC Action Plans and quickly adapting to the Hybrid Matrix. They are engaging programs that represent an excellent cross section of the early learning community and prioritizing those serving children with high needs. Several consortia have begun their program and classroom baseline assessments. Currently, local consortia are exploring in more depth the infrastructures needed to support marketing, cohort selection, higher education, and training for their local TQRIS.

- **Leveraging and Aligning with Other Efforts**

One of the most exciting successes to date expressed by the Consortia is the unprecedented opportunity RTT-ELC provides to refocus existing public and private investments on evidence-based and promising practices. In essence, RTT-ELC created an umbrella for other quality improvement and funding efforts. Prior to becoming a Consortia member, several consortia noted that their program quality efforts were well established but functioning as separate projects. With the TQRIS Framework and the RTT-ELC goals and objectives, these independent projects have aligned themselves with the overarching program quality improvement system and are beginning to build upon each other. The key quality improvement tools, such as the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS), integral to the adopted Hybrid Matrix now serve as a common foundation to align the work of other existing quality improvement efforts.

Locally, the Consortia have begun to fully integrate multiple funding streams from the federal, state, and local level into a comprehensive local quality improvement system – their TQRIS. Most of the Consortia noted in their Annual Performance Reports that they are using the local TQRIS as a framework for all their other quality efforts and using the definition of quality developed for RTT-ELC. Some consortia explicitly expressed that RTT-ELC has become a catalyst in leveraging existing programs such as the First 5

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<sup>1</sup> Developed with support from the California Birth to Five Policy Alliance Team.

California (F5CA) Child Signature Program (CSP), F5CA Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards (CARES) Plus, and grant funding.

As a result of the implementation of RTT-ELC, existing additional quality enhancement projects are updating their requirements to align with the requirements of RTT-ELC to create consistency across local publicly funded projects. Consortia have aligned these services to: ensure participants are prepared to be rated via the local TQRIS; support quality improvement in the participating early learning and development programs; and expand access to screenings and health care services. Many consortia noted most of the tiered program standards on the Hybrid Matrix have been in place as part of their F5CA Power of Preschool program (now the CSP) or other related quality improvement efforts.

Moreover, in recognition of their RTT-ELC participation, some local consortia received additional grants or other awards. For example, the Orange County Department of Education secured additional grant funding through the Boeing Charitable Trust and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

- **Grant Administration**

- **Grant Award Notification**

The Implementation Team completed the development of Grant Award Notification documents containing each consortium's funding amount, requirements, and assurances. These were sent to all the Consortia members and signed copies were sent back to the CDE.

- **Consortia RTT-ELC Action Plans**

Consortia developed local RTT-ELC Action Plans, including timelines and budgets that incorporated federal RTT-ELC requirements as well as followed the requirements from California's application. The Implementation Team reviewed the 17 Consortia Action Plans to ensure alignment with the RTT-ELC grant application, the Quality Continuum Framework and the Three Common Tiers, and federal and state grant requirements. The Implementation Team then worked collaboratively with individual consortia to resolve any discrepancies. As of the end of December 2012, the Implementation Team had approved 15 of the 17 Consortia RTT-ELC Action Plans and budgets with two still pending but imminent.

- **Disbursements**

Once the Grant Award Notifications and Action Plans were approved, the Implementation Team processed disbursement requests awarding 15 of the 17 consortium's annual funding amount. Funds for the remaining two will be released upon approval of their Action Plans.

- **One-time Statewide Investment Projects**

Considerable progress was made in developing contracts and/or Interagency Agreements to implement the various projects that are one-time statewide investments. These projects support the quality improvement of early learning and development programs participating in the local consortium's TQRIS as well as other early learning programs throughout the state. Nine contracts and one Interagency Agreement were executed in 2012 with the few remaining to be executed in 2013, including the RTT-ELC evaluation contract.

The following have been accomplished:

- Workforce – Contracts were executed to provide train-the-trainer on the Program Administration Scale (PAS) and the Business Administration Scale (BAS); expand Early Learning core curricula at California Community Colleges; and develop online courses for ECE providers.
- Health – Contracts were executed to provide infant/toddler trainings to California's Home Visiting Program staff; provide training on developmental screening for local consortia members; and develop several online courses providing overviews of the California Collaborative for the Social-Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CCSEFEL) teaching pyramid.
- Interagency Work – CDE staff worked with the California Departments of Social Services and Developmental Services to develop Interagency Agreements to develop training and resources.
- TQRIS – CDE staff began the development of the Request for Proposal for a validation evaluation to study the effectiveness of the Consortia TQRIS and submitted a draft to the federal RTT-ELC team in November.

## **Challenges**

As noted in California's application, implementation of RTT-ELC standards must address the diverse and unique needs of our vast state. Inherent in any implementation of this scale are logistical challenges, including effective communications, gaining and sustaining buy-in and engagement, and working within the bounds of multiple agencies and stakeholders. As a whole, the Implementation Team underestimated the time it would take to work through the structure and governance of these groups at multiple levels – the state, full Consortia, and each local consortium.

- **Development Process and Group Planning**

The goal of a locally determined TQRIS that has Three Common Tiers across the Consortia was an ambitious undertaking. There were many stakeholders and the decision-making took longer than originally anticipated. Consortia were progressing conservatively to ensure that resources were not wasted and to ensure program effectiveness. Additionally, the Consortia stated it was challenging to move forward with the implementation and design of their local projects while the Framework with Three Common Tiers was still under development and revision. The development and finalization of the common tiers of the QRIS took longer than expected, which delayed implementation of the rating system at the local level. Additionally, one group strongly felt that regional planning was important but also acknowledged it is more time consuming than local-only planning. Many consortia specifically stated their pleasure with the end result, and believe the time invested allowed them to fully benefit from the lessons learned by other states with existing TQRIS.

Several consortia noted challenges informing and soliciting the participation and support of local stakeholders during the numerous modifications that occurred in the development of the Hybrid Matrix with Three Common Tiers. In addition to face-to-face

meetings, conference calls were held to keep local consortium members informed. Moving to a hybrid point-based system was a new concept in a few consortia and time was needed to review research and national trends and engage stakeholders and culturally-diverse providers. As El Dorado County stated, “Our local consortium was patient while the full Consortia completed the challenging task of developing a simplified rating system and now has embraced the new hybrid point system and is eager to launch the program.”

- **Program Participation**

The reluctance on the part of early learning and development program providers, especially family child care home (FCCH), to participate was greater than anticipated. Many stakeholders were skeptical of a TQRIS, and many programs were reluctant to sign on to the local TQRIS without fully knowing the quality elements, participation requirements, and expectations. In addition, the potential broadcasting of ratings is much more frightening for providers than expected. In response to these concerns, some consortia have shifted more of their focus on planning for communication with providers, including more discussions about the benefits of participation. There is a sense that the finalized TQRIS will be more conducive to diverse providers including FCCH.

- **Rating and Monitoring Process and Data Systems**

Guaranteeing equity in rating the Three Common Tiers across Consortia is a significant challenge. To ensure consistency, a Rating and Monitoring Protocol is in the final stages of development by the Consortia. Many details have been addressed both at the full Consortia level and at the local level. For example, determining the random selection protocol based on number of classrooms in each age group is complicated and we anticipate further clarification as implementation expands. For some consortia, the first year has been challenging as they are in the development and implementation stage at the same time. There were multiple changes along the way, which required them to modify the progress they made with programs, limiting their ability to complete full ratings with participating programs.

Multiple capacity issues also created challenges in fully implementing the assessment and rating process to establish an initial rating for existing sites. For example, finding enough reliable, independent assessors needed to complete the ERS and the CLASS assessments was challenging for many of the Consortia. In addition, with the deepening use of data-driven practices, a few consortia encountered participation barriers as some childhood providers are not familiar with, or have limited access to, the Internet or technology.

The development of local databases and finalization of common data elements also has been challenging. Consortia share information to better learn from each other and in several cases, are developing shared regional databases to maximize efficiencies and share costs. The necessary common data elements for the required evaluation have not yet been fully clarified but once finalized the Consortia feel positioned to move forward quickly.

- **Coordination of Essential Training**

There were challenges in terms of the coordination of essential training and building the capacity of training opportunities in areas such as the ERS, CLASS certification, Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), and the CCSEFEL. Many consortia struggled with additional issues with regard to costs and minimum attendance requirements,

geographical isolation, the diversity of languages spoken by providers, and capacity building due to training restrictions.

While some consortia expressed strong partnerships with higher education institutions, others noted challenges, often due to several years of budget cuts, in engaging the community college and state university systems to align coursework with the evolving and emerging best practices from the national movement to create TQRIS. This includes a necessity to expand and deepen the content knowledge on the use of the ERS and CLASS needed by soon-to-be practitioners as part of informing effective teacher practices.

- **Staffing and Contracts**

The final TQRIS model is more multi-faceted and comprehensive than first anticipated. This has presented staffing challenges at all levels. For some, the intent was to implement with existing staff, building on what they were already doing, and contract out some of the work to develop and maintain the system. However, several consortia later determined adding internal staff was a more efficient and effective way to implement the project. Many consortia stated they have experienced delays in implementing their RTT-ELC pilot as they build their teams and search for qualified staff. Others are struggling with hiring freezes and staffing restrictions and must use existing staffing to support planning, coordination, and various tasks for TQRIS implementation. The amount of time needed to execute contracts creates another added layer to staff workload and contributes to program implementation delays.

## **Lessons Learned**

- **TQRIS**

The most significant planning lesson learned to date has been that “less is more” and the importance of limiting the number of items assessed on a TQRIS in order to avoid creating a confusing and cumbersome system. This was made evident during the Consortia planning meetings that were convened to design the Three Common Tiers into the Framework. The process of defining what these standards would be was intense and time consuming, yet the Consortia members stated the emergent framework is straightforward, focused, tied to improved child outcomes, and easier to explain to program providers.

- **Stakeholders and Partnerships**

The importance of ensuring that each consortium was inclusive of key stakeholders in the community, including representatives from the early learning profession (public and private), community agencies, county agencies, and higher education institutions was key to the success of the planning phase for RTT-ELC. This inclusive process enabled stakeholders and partners to realize their voices were heard in the development of local tiers and also facilitated commitment to a shared implementation vision of the local TQRIS. The development of partnerships at the local level allows Consortia members to use shared resources to maximize efficiencies and effectiveness. For example, in Los Angeles, they partnered with Los Angeles County Office of Education Head Start/Early Head Start in readily identifying 100 providers with whom they would be working. Using this partnership has allowed them to focus on enhancing their data collection systems, coaching model, and independent ratings and assessment procedures.

The partnerships between the Implementation Team and the Consortia, as well as across local consortia and across regions, are extremely valuable and powerful. The consistency in planning and the ability to bring local feedback up to the state level impacted change and direction. The Implementation Team provided the Consortia with relevant and timely research regarding TQRIS implementation nationwide and provided summaries about the advances in the science of early childhood education. The Consortia stated that participation in the Implementation Team-facilitated workgroups was highly useful in creating a community of learners. They gained significant expertise from each other, especially regarding local policies and challenges experienced by larger counties or counties where a TQRIS has been operating. As a result, the local effort and local TQRIS have benefited from the full Consortia expertise around the Three Common Tiers.

- **Flexibility and Patience**

Flexibility and patience were crucial to the program development process. It takes a minimum of a year to launch a major initiative, as time is needed for development and recruitment prior to implementation. It is imperative to the success and sustainability of the TQRIS to ensure that highly functional systems are in place prior to a formal public launch of the program.