

Vermont's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant

Executive Summary

2014

Overview

Vermont was awarded **\$36.9 million in federal funding** through its successful Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant proposal to build a high-quality and accessible early childhood system in the state. The award is spread over the four years of the grant period beginning in January, 2014, and is administered jointly by the federal Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. Implementation will be led by five participating organizations: The Governor's Office, Agency of Education, Agency of Human Services, particularly Department of Health and Department for Children and Families, and the Building Bright Futures Statewide Advisory Council, in coordination with communities and a broad range of early childhood stakeholders.

This grant provides a tremendous opportunity for Vermont to rapidly advance its larger reform agenda to **realize the promise of every child**. The grant proposal was informed by and supports ongoing efforts, including the Agency of Human Services' Integrated Family Services and the Vermont Early Childhood Framework and Action Plan sponsored by the Governor's Office and developed by a broad coalition over the past 12 months. In order to assure that positive impacts on early learning and development opportunities in states endure beyond the four years of grant funding, the focus of RTT-ELC is on funding for systemic development, not direct services. The Vermont plan focuses on strategies to:

- **Improve quality and access of early learning and development opportunities**
- **Invest in a highly skilled workforce through professional development**
- **Empower communities to support young children and families**
- **Strengthen our capacity to ensure we are making a difference**

Through these strategies Vermont will be able to achieve the absolute priority of the grant, which is to promote school readiness for children with high needs. The grant defines this as children from low-income families or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, including children who have disabilities or developmental delays, who are English language learners, migrant, homeless, or in foster care.

Vermont's winning RTT- ELC grant proposal told an important story about our state:

- Vermont is a good place to be a child. *Annie E Casey Foundation's Kids Count Report (2013) ranks Vermont second for overall well-being of its children.*
- Vermont became a good place because of longstanding political and financial investment in children. *Reviewers of Vermont's proposal found that the state demonstrates substantial past commitment, including increasing financial investment in most programs from 2009 – 2013 and responding to the needs of its children through relevant legislation, policies, or practices for the past 20 years.*
- But not all of Vermont's children are thriving. *Some children live in households that are not stable or safe, some experience early trauma or toxic stress, some don't speak English, some are challenged by developmental delays or disabilities and many - 26% of children under age 5 - live in poverty.*
- High quality interventions in early childhood can mitigate the impacts of poverty and other limiting conditions for children. Vermont's RTT-ELC state plan provides an opportunity to further our progress for children who are not thriving in the early years when it really counts – **to narrow the opportunity gap between high needs children and their peers before it occurs.**

Strategies

All strategies in the grant share three key characteristics:

- **Leverage** current successful efforts
- Produce **positive impacts** that will last beyond the grant period
- Are **achievable** and produce measurable short, medium and long-term results

➤ Improving Quality and Access

- **Promote participation in the VT STARS quality rating system to improve and maintain high quality early learning and development opportunities in programs**
 - Goals by 2017 (the end of the grant period) include: 95% of eligible early learning and development programs (EDLP) are participating in the VT STARS program and families will be able to access highly rated VT STARS programs in every community.
- **Validate and strengthen VT STARS system to ensure it accurately and reliably assesses quality**
 - Conduct a rigorous independent evaluation of the VT STARS to ensure that it is an accurate assessment of quality that predicts positive outcomes for children.
- **Annual financial rewards to STARS programs for maintaining quality and providing nutritious food**
 - Currently participating ELDPs receive a one-time bonus when they achieve a higher level in VT STARS. RTT-ELC will create an annual awards program for maintaining quality in addition to bonuses for improving.
 - VT STARS programs that offer nutritious meals and snacks will receive additional annual awards and the goal by 2017 is to increase the percentage of ELDPs in VT providing nutritious snacks and meals from 40% to 90%.
- **Expand Strengthening Families grants**
 - RTT-ELC will expand this successful model to support comprehensive services for high needs children in high quality ELDPs that promotes continuity of services and family centered practice.
- **Expand and improve Specialized Child Care Services**
 - A critical component of Children's Integrated Services (CIS), these are an array of services and supports to successfully include children with high needs in high quality early learning and development programs. RTT-ELC will increase local coordination, quality and capacity.
- **Evidence-based home visiting of pregnant women and young children**
 - Effective home visiting has been shown to lead to improved maternal and infant health, decreased accidental and non-accidental injury, decreased domestic violence, increased school readiness, increased economic self-sufficiency for families, and increased connection and referral to community resources. RTT-ELC will provide professional development and technical assistance to increase the use of evidence based models throughout Vermont, increase coordination of home visiting services, and track and report on services and outcomes.
 - The goal is to increase the number of high needs children receiving evidence based home visiting services by 20% during each year of the grant.
- **Universal developmental screening**
 - By 2017, the goal is to assure that 90% of all children with high needs have had a developmental screening for any developmental and behavioral concerns, followed by appropriate referrals.

- By utilizing Help Me Grow as the strategy is to align across settings, including medical homes, home visiting programs, Early Head Start, and IDEA Part C and Part B 619, we will ensure the use of standardized tools, avoid duplication and share data to optimize healthy development of Vermont's children.
- **Create and implement a comprehensive monitoring and technical assistance system to ensure quality of Vermont's publicly funded PreK Programs**
 - Vermont prekindergarten programs are currently not assessed beyond verifying STARS levels and licensed early educators.
 - The grant allows us to establish a system that also looks at programs' curricula and educator practices, the keys to quality and to closing the opportunity gap, so we get full value for our investments in publicly funded PreK.

➤ **Investing in a Highly Skilled Workforce**

- **New VT Early Learning Standards (VELS): Finalize, Disseminate and Train**
 - In Vermont, the foundation for all ELDPs, including child care licensing regulations and publicly funded PreK, is a set of research-based early learning and development standards.
 - RTT-ELC funds will assist us to complete revising VELS to reflect a full birth through grade 3 continuum. The new VELS are also aligned with the Common Core. This will help children have smoother transitions between their experiences before kindergarten and across K-3.
 - A Family Guide to the VELS will be developed so that families can be engaged in their children's learning and development.
- **Conduct a workforce study**
 - This will assess the characteristics, qualifications, conditions and needs of the professionals working with young children and families to provide a baseline for measuring progress on workforce goals and plan effective cross-sector professional development strategies.
- **Invest in Vermont's newly formed TEACH scholarship program**
 - This provides financial and coaching support for early childhood professional to attain credentials and degrees through college coursework.
 - There will be a 15% increase in availability and accessibility of advanced training and coursework for early childhood educators in each year of the grant.
- **Expand Vermont's successful Apprenticeship program for early childhood professionals**
 - Through RTT-ELC, Vermont will expand this very successful and sought after program of free college courses and formal on-the-job mentoring throughout the state.
- **Early Childhood Higher Education Workgroup to eliminate barriers to obtaining degrees and educator licensure**
 - The grant will support representatives from higher education institutes to develop a shared agenda to work on eliminating barriers and improving quality, through strategies such as aligning coursework and articulation agreements.
- **Individualized support for early childhood professionals and programs**
 - RTT-ELC will support relationship-based MATCH [Mentoring, Advising, Teaching, Coaching, Consulting, Helping] and services focused on helping individual practitioners and programs improve skills and competencies to support increasing quality in ELDPs.

- During each funding year, there will be a 20% increased use of documented mentoring and coaching.
- **Training on using the new Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS)**
 - The KRS is being revised to more accurately record children’s kindergarten readiness. Professional development will be provided so kindergarten teachers who complete this assessment understand the items and rating scales fully in order to provide good data and so ELDP professionals can use the data to help them fully prepare their students for Kindergarten.
- **Increase educators’ reliable use of TS GOLD as an effective formative assessment from birth to grade 3 and use results to inform practices**
 - When educators have good information on children’s early learning and development strengths and challenges, they can provide experiences that match individual children’s development. Additionally, TS GOLD data are shared with families so they can become partners in supporting their children’s growth.
 - The grant will fund trainings and onsite coaching for educators serving children birth – grade 3.
- **Provide a comprehensive system of training in the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)**
 - CLASS assesses the quality of the adult-child interactions and child-child interactions, key factors in supporting child’s learning and development.
 - The system will cover educators across the birth-grade 3 span and will provide feedback and strategies for improving educators’ practices.
- **Health and safety consultation for early care and education programs**
 - RTT-ELC will increase the number of early childhood educators who are trained and supported in promoting healthy eating habits, improved nutrition, expanded physical activity, and providing information and guidance to families to promote healthy habits at home.
 - Consultation will provide an array of reliable health and safety resources for ELD programs through web-based information and call-line resource and referral with on-site consultation services as requested.
- **Implement and sustain an Early Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework at the state, regional and local level for social and emotional development, as well as literacy and numeracy skills.**
 - Early VT/MTSS utilizes a tiered framework of universal promotion, prevention and intervention for delivering a comprehensive range of evidence based practices to early childhood leaders, practitioners and families with the goal of improving learning and development outcomes for all infants, toddlers and young children.
 - Regional BBF Councils will be provided grants to build capacity to implement and sustain Early MTSS within their regions.

➤ **Empowering Communities**

- **Engage and support Promise Communities**
 - Invite rural communities to mitigate opportunity gaps for children by working to transform every aspect of the environment they grow up in. RTT-ELC will provide human, informational and financial resources to help citizens and stakeholders plan, imagine and work together across sectors to do “whatever it takes” to significantly improve the educational and developmental outcomes for children in their communities.

- **Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute**
 - RTT-ELC will develop and implement an intensive learning experience for a diverse set of stakeholders engaged in transforming early learning and development in Vermont. Participants from across the state will be given an opportunity to understand the science and research that must inform action in this arena, grow relationships, and develop skills in leadership and cross-sector collaboration.
- **Pilot a PreK-Grade 3 approach that has been shown to narrow the opportunity gap for children with high needs**
 - Through an intensive three year relationship with First School, PreK-grade 3 communities from 3-4 supervisory unions with high percentages of high needs children will learn to use early learning and development practices that are aligned and effective.
 - Create a cadre of PreK-grade 3 experts to work with other schools across the state.
- **Vermont will use its existing governance structure in Building Bright Futures to assure broad partner and stakeholder participation and collaboration in the management and implementation of the reform agenda throughout the State**
 - Provide BBF the resources to be an effective and consistent leader and connector throughout the state to build up and support each local system of early care, health and education that conforms to statewide standards and reflects the unique characteristics of each region.

➤ **Ensure that we are Making a Difference**

- **Enhance Vermont's ability to measure its improvements in instruction, practices, services, and policies that support the health, development, and learning of children and their families by building a coordinated, integrated 21st Century early learning data system.**
- **Creation of a Birth through Grade 12 Data Governance Council**
 - Address the practical need to ensure that the State of Vermont has an enhanced coordinated, early learning data system across the Agency of Education, Agency of Human Services, and the Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council, Inc.
 - Develop and establish policies and procedures regarding transparency, security, the exchange of data, and an identity management system to enable the assignment of unique identifies when needed to protect privacy of individuals and the matching of records among data systems.
- **Complete the Early Childhood Data and Reporting System (ECDRS) by the end of 2016 to address the needs of early learning programs, early childhood educators, parents, and the public-at-large for accessible, timely, and accurate data:**
 - ECDRS is a searchable integrated online repository and toolbox holding care, education, health, and program quality datasets. The ECDRS is structured to integrate data in order to answer questions about the well-being of young children, their families, and their communities.
- **Expand the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) to Include Early Childhood Data**
 - There are many separate databases that only provide a fragmented picture of how children are doing. This strategy will link and integrate key databases to the SLDS for a complete picture.
- **Close a critical data gap by developing and implementing a case management and data collection system for Children's Integrated Services (CIS)**
 - This will include integration of Home Visiting programs as well as other integrated services for young children and families.