



## MEETING THE CHALLENGE:

# How the Newest Early Learning Challenge Grantees Can Meet the Needs of Infants and Toddlers

### GRANTEES FEATURED

Georgia

Kentucky

Michigan

New Jersey

Pennsylvania

Vermont

In December 2013, **Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont** became the newest states to receive Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (ELC) grants.

Like the 14 states that received awards before them, they plan to use the majority of their ELC funds to strengthen the systems that support all young children; however, their applications also included some proposals intended to improve outcomes specifically for infants and toddlers. These activities primarily focus on infant-toddler early learning guidelines and professional development for the infant-toddler workforce. Many of the broader strategies—such as those to expand home visiting services, build communities’ capacity to provide high-quality services, increase family engagement, and develop processes to better connect families to services—also have potential to improve outcomes for babies if their needs are intentionally addressed.

### Development and Integration of Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers

Early Learning Guidelines (ELG) describe what children should know (understandings) and be able to do (competencies and skills) across multiple domains of learning during specified age ranges. ELG for infants and toddlers can help parents, professionals, and policymakers understand early development and how they can support it. Embedding ELG for infants and toddlers into the framework of the early childhood system can result in a more qualified infant-toddler workforce, more intentional and appropriate practices to support infant-toddler development in early care and education settings, and stronger alignment between infant-toddler standards and those for older children.

Several of the new ELC grantees plan to develop, revise, and/or further integrate their ELG for infants and toddlers.

- **Pennsylvania** and **Vermont** are both revising their ELG to ensure they are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for all children. They are also taking steps to ensure the ELG are aligned with other standards and frameworks, such as the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework, Common Core State Standards for K–12, state education standards, and kindergarten entry assessments. **Pennsylvania’s** standards already include infants and toddlers. **Vermont** will be extending their current ELG to include infancy to grade 3.
- **New Jersey** and **Georgia** adopted new ELG that include infants and toddlers before receiving ELC grants, but both plan to use ELC funds to roll them out. **New Jersey** will integrate the new ELG into its professional development system and Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The state is also creating a library of video clips aligned with the ELG to show what children know and are able to do at different ages. **Georgia** has plans to create resources, tools, and professional development based on the ELG. The state will also align them with national standards for English language learners and create professional development tools for early childhood educators working with English language learners.
- All four states—**Georgia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont**—have plans to widely disseminate their ELG to parents and professionals to ensure they are used to support young children’s healthy development.

### Professional Development for the Infant-Toddler Workforce

Infants and toddlers develop primarily through relationships with family members and caregivers in the context of their communities and cultures. Professionals working with very young children

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require a level of specialized knowledge and skill that is unique to the developmental needs of the early foundational years. States can prepare and support these professionals by infusing strong infant-toddler components into all aspects of their professional development systems. All six of the new ELC grantees have initiatives in this area.

- **New Jersey** and **Michigan** plan to work with higher education to improve access to and infant-toddler content of credit-bearing courses. **New Jersey** plans to respond to a recently conducted higher education inventory, which found that education degree programs at both the baccalaureate and graduate levels need to expand their focus on infants and toddlers. **Michigan** plans to partner with five community colleges to offer online Child Development Associate (CDA) credential courses, including some with infant-toddler content, which will be transferable toward an associate degree. The state plans to target the new classes to home-based child care providers, who serve the majority of high-need children.
- **Pennsylvania** and **Kentucky** have plans to expand their career lattices in ways that will assist infant-toddler professionals. **Pennsylvania** will develop an infant-toddler credential and incorporate it into the state's career lattice and workforce registry. **Kentucky** already expanded the workforce pipeline by embedding requirements for state and nationally recognized credentials that infant-toddler professionals acquire (CDA and Certificate of Eligibility for KY Child Care Credential) into public high schools. The courses will now be integrated into the new state career lattice so that students who take them will not only be prepared to work in

the field after graduation, but also will be eligible for professional development supports including scholarships.

- **Georgia** is expanding its coaching and mentoring system to support infant-toddler teachers located in the Early Education Empowerment Zones (E<sup>3</sup>Z) and other rural areas serving high percentages of children with high needs. Services will be provided in English and Spanish.
- Some ELC grantees are also taking steps to build capacity in infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). **New Jersey** and **Vermont** are planning to offer new IECMH professional development opportunities to infant-toddler professionals and those serving older children. **New Jersey** will partner with IECMH experts to provide at least 200 early childhood educators with direct training services and resources in the Infant-Mental Health Endorsement (IMH<sup>®</sup>E, which the state recently adopted) and/or the Pyramid Model certification by 2017. IECMH trainings will also be offered to early childhood, child welfare, and community partners in the 10 counties affected by Superstorm Sandy. The state also plans to crosswalk its existing Infant/Toddler Certificate with the IMH<sup>®</sup>E. **Vermont** plans to increase the involvement of IECMH professionals as practice coaches through the state's professional development system.
- In response to a study finding that the majority of children with high needs in child care are cared for in home-based environments, **Michigan** is targeting many of its professional development initiatives specifically toward these providers. The state plans to pilot the use of three types of consultants—health, family engagement, and social-emotional—to help providers improve quality. The state is also going to implement a new parent/community café approach to support home-based providers in certain communities. Infants and toddlers make up a large percentage of the children served by home-based providers, so the state's efforts to improve their knowledge and skills has the potential to significantly affect the care very young children receive.

## What Is the ELC?

The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (ELC) grant program is a joint effort by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to improve early learning and development for young children. It does so by supporting states' efforts to: increase the number of children with high needs, birth to 5 years old, in high-quality early childhood settings; and build comprehensive early childhood systems. Twenty states have received 4-year ELC grants ranging from \$20 to \$70 million since the program was initiated in 2011.

## Expansion of Home Visiting

A growing body of research demonstrates that home visiting can improve outcomes for maternal and child health, home and child safety, school readiness, family economic self-sufficiency, and linkages to community resources. Home visiting can also be an effective way of enhancing parents'

abilities to support their infants' and toddlers' healthy cognitive, language, social-emotional, and physical development. Recognizing this fact, **Georgia** and **Vermont** included proposals in their ELC applications to strengthen their home visiting systems.

- **Georgia** plans to pilot an innovative center-based home visiting initiative in the E<sup>3</sup>Zs it is creating to target resources to high-need communities. Child care programs with the highest QRIS star ratings will be selected to participate. Each will employ a coordinator and multiple home visitors who will deliver voluntary prevention services at the child care center and in families' homes. They will also facilitate group meetings modeled after Early Head Start activities. Through the pilot, **Georgia** hopes to determine the specific drivers to higher outcomes for children and families so that they can be sustained beyond the ELC grant period.

- **Vermont's** application outlines plans to implement an evidence-based statewide home visiting system by expanding models already operating (Nurse-Family Partnership, Early Head Start, and Parents as Teachers) and initiating new ones (Early Start and Maternal Early Childhood Sustained Home Visiting). Technical assistance, training, and quality assurance measures will be used to ensure model fidelity. The proposal builds off work being done through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health (Project LAUNCH) grants.

## Capacity Building in High-Need Communities

Young children with high needs often live in communities that do not have enough high-quality services and supports for all the families who need them. This is a complex, foundational issue that impacts virtually every aspect of improving outcomes for young children and their families. Grantees approach this challenge in a variety of ways and are experimenting with diverse strategies. Here we describe some of these unique approaches:

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## INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

**Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Vermont** are directing substantial resources to a small number of target areas to strengthen local early childhood systems. The states plan to do this through a combination of infrastructure development and provision of intensive services. All three stressed in their applications the importance of community-driven solutions and will meaningfully involve local parents, providers, and other relevant stakeholders in planning.

### E<sup>3</sup>Zs

**Georgia** will create four E<sup>3</sup>Zs in areas with large numbers of children with high needs. In addition to the center-based home visiting pilot, a primary focus within the E<sup>3</sup>Zs is to increase the accessibility of high-quality early learning and development programs. The state plans to do this by targeting key QRIS supports to the E<sup>3</sup>Zs so that all existing programs move up to at least a star level two, offering additional incentives for children and families to choose high-quality options, and creating new incentive packages that leverage existing state benefits (such as tax breaks for businesses that create new jobs and low-interest loans) to convince businesses that have demonstrated an ability to operate high-quality facilities to locate in the E<sup>3</sup>Zs.

## INNOVATION GRANTS

**Pennsylvania** will use a competitive process to award 50 Early Childhood Education Community Innovation grants to communities that have completed a self-assessment and agree to focus on early childhood education and school linkages, family engagement, and community connections. The investment zones will receive targeted training and technical assistance to help them reach their goals. The state will prioritize rural areas that currently have limited capacity to deliver high-quality early childhood education. Grant recipients are expected to develop roadmaps and toolkits that can inform replication of their efforts in other areas of the state.

## PROMISE COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

**Vermont** is going to invest in a Promise Community initiative to mobilize six distressed rural communities each year of the grant to work toward the transformation of every aspect of the environment in which poor children grow up. A state-level implementation team will be created, including three coaches to engage participating communities in coalition-building and planning. The state will provide seed money to help Promise Communities implement strategies such as: "Baby



College” programs to educate young parents about child development, welcome baby visits to link new parents to local resources and other families, support for community health clinics, and shared services models to better support comprehensive services in local early learning and development programs.

## Engaging and Supporting Families

Parents are their children’s first teacher and play a critical role in supporting their young children’s healthy development. Early childhood programs and services are most effective when they engage parents and other family members. The new ELC grantees have several initiatives to improve family engagement within the early childhood system and increase parents’ understanding of early childhood development.

- **Kentucky, Michigan, and New Jersey** plan to integrate the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s Strengthening Families strength-based framework of protective factors into their services and systems. All of the public and private partners in **Kentucky’s** ELC grant will integrate the framework into services they currently provide to low-income families. **Michigan** and **New Jersey** will ensure their QRIS standards reflect the framework. **New Jersey** will use an evidence-based progression of statewide family engagement standards in its QRIS, and both will train early care and education providers on the protective factors. **Georgia** developed its own family engagement standards and plans to provide professional development on them to early childhood educators. The state will also ensure the QRIS program standards are aligned to them.

- **Kentucky, Michigan, and Pennsylvania** have initiatives to help parents understand their children’s development and how they can support it. **Kentucky** plans to expand the Toyota bornlearning®

Academies—school-based workshops for low-income families with young children that offer parents strategies they can use at home to maximize their child’s early learning and development—to reach 150 or more elementary schools over the grant period. Existing Family Resource & Youth Services Centers (FRYSC)

will be used to offer the workshops with the intention of fully incorporating the bornlearning® program into FRYSC core components so that it will be sustained after the ELC grant ends. **Michigan** will engage existing Great Start Parent Coalitions to work collaboratively with other community stakeholders to widely disseminate materials about early childhood learning and development to families across the state. **Pennsylvania** plans to update and improve its Early Learning Guiding Parents Smoothly (GPS) website for parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The GPS is an interactive tool that helps families understand what they can do to help their young children learn and grow.

## Connecting Families to Appropriate Services

The services and supports that families with young children need are often administered by multiple agencies and operate in an uncoordinated fashion. Implementing processes to make it easier to connect families to the programs that are most appropriate for them is essential. Both **New Jersey** and **Vermont** outlined proposals to do so in their ELC applications.

- **New Jersey** will expand its network of central intake hubs, which currently operate in fifteen counties, across the state. Hubs serve as a single point of entry for families to link to services including health insurance, primary care/pediatric medical homes, WIC, Part C Early Intervention, child behavioral health and mental health, and early education programs.
- **Vermont** plans to implement the Connecticut Help Me Grow framework to serve as a central mechanism to coordinate and track developmental screening results and referrals. The state will translate some educational materials into languages other than English to increase the number of refugee children who are screened. **Vermont** also plans to develop and implement a case management and data collection system for its current Children’s Integrated Services (CIS) program. CIS co-locates Part C Early Intervention, early childhood and family mental health, nursing and family support, and specialized child care services in the Department for Children and Families. CIS teams across the state already use common referral and intake forms and a case management form to develop a comprehensive and individualized child and/or family plan.

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## Conclusion

The newest ELC grantees have innovative and ambitious plans to improve the quality of early childhood services and increase the number of children and families with high needs who have access to them. Their focus on building infrastructure, cultivating leaders, and preparing the workforce will support further improvements to their early childhood systems after the grant ends. However, because these states have few proposals that focus specifically on improving outcomes for infants and toddlers, it is vital that they intentionally address the unique needs of infants and toddlers when implementing strategies aimed at broader age-groups. This could mean incorporating infant-toddler-specific criteria into QRIS, providing additional supports—such as infant-toddler specialists—to child care centers serving very young children to help them improve quality, or prioritizing increasing access to infant-toddler care in target communities.

## Additional Resources

This article discusses some of the ELC initiatives **Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont** are pursuing. Information was drawn from their ELC applications. If you are interested in learning more, they can be downloaded on the U.S. Department of Education's website <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/awards.html>

ZERO TO THREE has developed a number of resources related to the ELC, including a toolkit outlining how states can use the ELC to benefit infants and toddlers and articles detailing how previous ELC grantees' targeted very young children. View them all at [www.zerotothree.org/elc](http://www.zerotothree.org/elc)