Pennsylvania’s Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant

In December 2013, Pennsylvania won a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant of $51.7 million over four years. This grant builds upon Pennsylvania's successes to provide more at-risk children such as children living in low-income families, English language learners, children with disabilities and developmental delays, and children experiencing homelessness, with high-quality early learning opportunities to close the achievement gap.

More information is available on the Pennsylvania Department of Education website at http://www.education.pa.gov/Early%20Learning/Race%20to%20the%20Top/Pages/default.aspx#.VeRIVfVhHw.

Early Childhood Education Community Innovation Zone Grants

Providing Pennsylvania’s children with quality early learning experiences is a collaborative effort of families, schools and communities that can produce a huge return on investment for all. Pennsylvania offered 50 Community Innovation Grants to at-risk elementary schools and neighborhoods.

The first phase of the grants were awarded in 2014 to 12 communities with exemplary programs in place and willing to mentor phase two grantees. Thirty-eight additional grants were awarded in 2015. Grantees receive intensive supports and local grants to increase family engagement, strengthen relationships between early childhood providers and schools to build birth – 3rd grade alignment, and strengthen community collaborations. In 2016, Pennsylvania focused on building the sustainability of these successful local projects by making promising practices accessible statewide and building the capacity of the CIZ collaborations to obtain resources to continue work after the grant period ends.

Keystone STARS

Keystone STARS reversed a 10-year trend in declining quality in child care.¹ With more than 10 years of experience, now is the time for further refinement and expansion of the program. In 2015 the University of Pennsylvania and William Penn Foundation released an inquiry of Keystone STARS which will help inform future revisions. In 2016, Pennsylvania made significant progress towards re-visioning Keystone STARS. Pennsylvania engaged more than 2,000 stakeholders in its Keystone STARS Re-visioning work, which led to new Core Values, new logic model and framework to refine its structure, indicators, monitoring and supports to increase access to high-quality early learning. The new Keystone STARS system will launch for the 2017-18 program year.

A priority of the RTT-ELC grant is to increase the number of regulated child care providers in rural counties. Outreach and information to promote registration or licensing as a child care provider and participation in STARS is ongoing. As of December 2016, more than 125 child care facilities have enrolled and designated at least STAR 1 in the targeted rural counties.

Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood

Pennsylvania's Learning Standards from birth through second grade are the foundation upon which all state-funded early childhood education programs build quality. As Pennsylvania has refined its academic standards for Kindergarten-12th grade, it refined its Learning Standards for Early Childhood to align with these new expectations for children at kindergarten entry, with greater attention to cultural, developmental and linguistic appropriateness. Revised Infant/Toddler and Pre-kindergarten Early Learning Standards were released in early July 2014. Revised Kindergarten, First and Second grade standards were released in 2016.

Comprehensive Assessment Systems

Pennsylvania offers a comprehensive system of assessments such as early developmental screening and ongoing assessment of children's progress, program quality, and the quality of adult-child interaction. With the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grant, Pennsylvania is focusing on improving access to, quality and application of birth-Pre-K assessment systems. Upon review, Pennsylvania discovered that there were not many quality professional development options for providers to effectively use various assessments. Because these assessments are critical to a high-quality program, Pennsylvania developed quality tools and professional development around the basics of assessment.

Workforce Development

Pennsylvania will increase the effectiveness of professional development and technical assistance and expand access for programs serving children with high needs through initiatives such as an improved professional development registry, promoting credit-bearing opportunities, and examining effective coaching models. The new Professional Development Registry launched in July 2014. Eighteen higher education institutions were awarded mini-grants in 2015 to align over 300 early childhood education courses with the Pennsylvania Core Knowledge Competencies for Early Childhood and School-Age Professionals. Additionally, 10 self-paced learning modules were developed and published in Workforce Professional Development Registry. We've been developing stronger relationships with the PA Department of Higher Education and Institutions of Higher Education in the commonwealth to provide coursework that aligns not only with our Core Knowledge Competencies, but also with the RTT competencies project. We are supporting Universities to offer courses that encompass the Infant/Toddler Competencies and Master Consultant Competences, as we shift our current PD/TA model into a new paradigm of a Coaching Model.

Pennsylvania's Kindergarten Entry Inventory

Until 2014, Pennsylvania estimated children's skill levels entering kindergarten based on district-specific tools, but there was no consistent statewide measure to identify a child's cognitive and non-cognitive skills levels or evaluate aggregate data for continuous quality improvement in P-3 alignment. Over a three-year period, Pennsylvania has piloted and refined a reliable Kindergarten Entry Inventory. As part of its Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant, Pennsylvania is expanding the Kindergarten Entry Inventory statewide at no cost to school districts and developing professional development and supports to inform instruction, professional development, and P-3 alignment. In 2015, 1,016 teachers from 306 schools (50 districts; 15 charter schools) finalized Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI) observations for 21,168 children, a 34% increase in the number of children from Cohort 1 (2014.) Highlights of Phase 1 of the external validation study using 2014 and 2015 data found that the 2015 KEI scores are reliable for teachers to use to differentiate the abilities of children who do not receive special services at the start of kindergarten and to share this information with parents. Also, the scores were found to be reliable for use to distinguish the average school readiness of kindergarten classrooms.
Measuring Outcomes and Progress

Pennsylvania embraces accountability in its early childhood education system to ensure children are receiving the best quality early childhood education possible and experience the best possible results. Pennsylvania is expanding the state longitudinal data system to include children enrolled in subsidized child care; improve the online provider application and renewal process to make it more intuitive and user-friendly in a mobile-friendly design; enhance the online attendance and payment tracking for subsidized child care – to also include a mobile-friendly design; and expand web-based tools available to early learning programs, families and the communities to access information about OCDEL's programs.

Governor’s Institutes for Educators Pre-K to Grade 3

Week-long Governor's Institutes will bring early learning professionals from birth-5 and K-3 settings together in teams to focus on instructional strategies to promote a comprehensive set of early learning standards; and support teams to develop an action plan to implement Pre-K to Grade 3 strategies in their local settings. In 2016, Participation in the Pre-natal – 3rd Grade Governor's Institutes, “P-3 Collaboration: Working Together for Student Success,” increased by 40 percent.

For more information on Pennsylvania’s Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, please contact Sue Polojac at spolojac@pa.gov.