



EXECUTIVE
Chapter
8
SUMMARY

**Impact of the Early Learning Challenge
on State Quality Rating and Improvement Systems**

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Preface

Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (ELC) is the major federal funding initiative seeking to support states in developing high quality early childhood systems, especially targeted to children with high needs. Launched in 2011 as a joint initiative of the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, there have been three rounds of major grants under the ELC, with 20 states now participating and funding that totals just over \$1 billion.

This federal initiative had particular meaning to the BUILD Initiative and its founders, members of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative. For more than a decade, BUILD has served as a catalyst for change and a national support system for state policy leaders and early childhood systems development. Not only did BUILD’s work help shape the federal initiative, but it was also the fulfillment of the founders’ most fervent hopes—that states could create detailed blueprints for an early childhood system, with budgets to support significant infrastructure development. BUILD staff, consultants, and many colleagues in the field rose to the challenge and provided extensive support to states as they applied for, and now implement, the federal opportunity.

The Early Learning Challenge supports states in their efforts to align, coordinate, and improve the quality of existing early learning and development programs across the multiple funding streams that support children from their birth through age five. Through the ELC, states focus on foundational elements of a state system: creating high quality, accountable early learning programs through Quality Rating and Improvement Systems; supporting improved child development outcomes through health, family engagement and vigorous use of early learning state standards and assessments; strengthening the early childhood workforce; and measuring progress.

Thirty-five states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico applied for the 2011 round of the Early Learning Challenge grants with nine states initially and then five more selected from this pool for funding. Sixteen states plus the District of Columbia responded to a new 2013 third round of grants; six were selected.

Round 1: California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington

Round 2: Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin

Round 3: Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont

Since the launch of the ELC, grantee states have rapidly moved from concept to implementation. Through this E-Book, we share learnings from the initial implementation of the efforts, highlighting experience, trends, and reflections stemming from the significant federal investment in this strategic work. The chapters are authored by experts who have worked in tandem with state leaders to gather information. By documenting the experience of the states, captured through interviews with state leaders, *Rising to the Challenge* provides a source of learning for all fifty states and territories and puts into practice our leadership commitment to continuous learning in the best interests of the children and families to whom we are all dedicated.



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Executive Summary

Over the two decades that Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) have existed, their focus has changed dramatically. Amidst a backdrop of low-level public and private financing for child care, QRIS initially used child care licensing standards to address standards of care, with proponents of QRIS aiming to improve quality within that context. Today, QRIS is a unique tool for systems reform that has the potential to reach programs that serve a wide range of children and are financed by many public and private sources. The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (ELC) has played a huge role in that transformation.

” QRIS is a unique tool for systems reform.

The requirement of the ELC, that states establish a QRIS, was a gamble. QRIS is not a single element that will improve early education and care for young children; it is an approach - a framework for an entire statewide early learning system with potential for linkages to the broader early childhood system. The requirement, therefore, tasked states with an enormous and complex responsibility. Intensifying that burden was that the establishment of a QRIS was seen by many as the ELC's *raison d'être*. Failure to meet the requirement would have cast doubt on the overall value of the ELC.

But states rose to the challenge and the gamble paid off. While all 20 of the ELC states throughout the three rounds of grant-making have met with multiple political, financial and structural constraints in their QRIS work and, at times, struggled to reach their proposed targets, the results have largely been extremely positive. States have begun the alignment of early learning sectors through the QRIS in several innovative ways, nine of which are outlined in this summary.

In her e-book chapter, Debi Mathias, Director of BUILD's QRIS National Learning Network, traces the history of QRIS, emphasizing the impact of the ELC's systems-building focus, while highlighting the trends and innovations it inspired. Based on interviews with state leaders throughout 2014, as well as information gathered from websites, reports, and the [QRIS Compendium](#), the chapter is structured according to the standard components of a QRIS - Standards for Programs and Practitioners; Support to Meet Standards; System Planning, Monitoring and Accountability; Family and Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach; and Financial Supports and Financing - and underscores the impact of the ELC on each of these standards. The chapter also describes the benefits of QRIS, as well as lessons learned and challenges experienced by states, and their recommendations for future efforts.

Trends and Innovations Inspired by the ELC

Below are nine of the many noteworthy ways in which states have met the ELC challenge. Following this list of trends and innovations is a chart illustrating the particular activities in which specific states have engaged.

1. Promoting School Readiness. States are increasing rigor and a focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes at the upper levels of their standards. Many states have addressed the teaching context by:

- Adding standards for planning and/or preparation around learning opportunities for children.
- Altering staff evaluation.
- Improving staff benefits.

2. Continuous Quality Improvement.

States are—visioning the T in QRIS and incorporating Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) by:

- Embedding CQI plans as a required element of the QRIS at all levels—sometimes in all areas and in other states limited to specific areas.
- Supporting CQI through technical assistance and coaching focused on CQI.
- Developing CQI for the QRIS system with providers, advocates and implementation partners providing routine feedback on indicators, processes and opportunities for improvement.

3. Bringing Together Child Care, Head Start

Pre-K. States are refining, establishing and tracking the participation of cross-sector programs to understand how the cross-sector framework is working. They are:

- Focusing on increasing participation of market-based child care programs in QRIS by enacting or proposing policy to require market-based child care participation or by making the first-tier equivalent to state child-care licensing; and/or by making or planning to make participation in the QRIS a funding requirement for CCDF child care assistance.
- Seeking to engage state-funded pre-k, Head Start, and/or nationally accredited centers in their QRIS.
- Focusing on building the infrastructure and administrative capacity to slowly grow participation in all settings.
- Making regulation-exempt family providers a QRIS target.



4. Reaching Children with High Needs.

States are ensuring policy and supports are focused on building quality early learning for various populations of children at risk, including children with disabilities, dual language learners and low-income children, among others. Approaches include:

- Embedding standards for accepting children with disabilities at all levels of the QRIS, not just at the higher levels.
- Creating “badges” or “awards of excellence” in areas such as inclusion of children with special needs, linguistically- and culturally-appropriate practice.
- Developing standards for cultural and linguistic diversity with indicators in multiple areas, i.e. curriculum, environment and interactions, and family partnership and engagement.
- Requiring programs taking public funding through child care assistance or state pre-k to participate in the QRIS and/or reducing co-pays in child care assistance for families selecting a higher level QRIS program.
- Using early childhood “navigators” to assist low-income families in selecting higher quality programs.
- Leveraging data analysis and data measurement to identify and increase participation of low-income families in higher level QRIS programs, and to bring programs into the QRIS.

5. Revisiting Rating and Monitoring.

States are re-visiting rating and monitoring and experimenting with various new approaches. They are:

- Introducing technology to make rating and monitoring more efficient.
- Limiting or removing on-site verification prior to the assignment of ratings and experimenting with other strategies (portfolio reviews by teams, random site visits, etc.).
- Introducing curriculum implementation and fidelity monitoring.
- Building robust data transfers between QRIS, licensing, and subsidy to assist with rating and monitoring.
- Leveraging licensing monitors as part of the rating and monitoring process.

6. Trying New Tools. States are diversifying the number and use of research-based observational tools and revising the frequency of administration of tools and the aspects to be maintained. Approaches include:

- Using both the ERS and the CLASS to inform ratings and experimenting with when and how they are used (i.e. removing Personal Care Routine from the ERS, using these tools for quality improvement and not rating purposes).
- Developing new research-based observation tools.
- Administering tools anywhere from annually to every three years.

7. Engaging Families. States are using a variety of strategies to enhance families' decision-making information, engage families in evaluating how services are working for them and support families as critical players in the early development of their children. Strategies include:

- Holding family focus groups to inform engagement strategies and providing routine family feedback sessions and surveys.
- Reaching out to families through mass and social media, community information distribution, and marketing materials.
- Providing information in multiple languages.
- Supporting provider outreach to families with suites of branding materials and templates for customization by providers.

8. Implementing Financing Strategies.

States are trying financing strategies aligned with the goals of the QRIS to improve services and outcomes for children. States are:

- Establishing multiple financial rewards and incentives (combining awards, tiered reimbursement and targeted grants).
- Establishing financial incentives to serve infants and toddlers and provide increased funding to help address the higher cost of serving this population.
- Using cost modeling to calibrate the necessary financial supports at each level of the QRIS and adjusting financing strategies in response.
- Supporting discounted access to supplies and equipment or providing awards to supply purchasing aligned to their quality improvement plans.
- Requiring QRIS participation (and sometimes at certain levels) to access more favorably funded programs, particularly pre-k.
- Using tiered reimbursement as a routine financing approach.

9. Focus and Funding for Teaching and Learning.

States are adding financing to support their new, more rigorous standards that focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes but this support is outpacing investment in teacher compensation. States are:

- Providing resources for programs to purchase curriculum and assessment tools, and improving technical assistance to support provider implementation of curriculum and assessment.
- Financing acquisition of early childhood credentials and degrees.
- Providing bonuses for acquisition of early childhood credential and degrees.



Moving Forward

Early Learning Challenge funding was fundamental in providing both the opportunity and incentive for creating cross-sector QRIS that move beyond program quality and into improved child outcomes. Much credit is due, both to the architects of the ELC, for emphasizing the importance of developing and implementing a QRIS, and to the states, for taking on the challenge with enthusiasm and creativity. The task has been formidable and doesn't end now that the ELC funding is winding down. But states are much further ahead in this work than they were six years ago, when the ELC grant competition was announced. They can now take the valuable lessons provided by the ELC into the next phase of QRIS work.

Below is a chart showing states that have engaged in the nine trends and innovations listed above:

STATE EXAMPLES	CA	CO	DE	GA	IL	KY	MA	MD	MI	MN	NC	NM	OH	OR	PA	RI	VT	WA	WI	
1. Promoting School Readiness. States are increasing rigor and a focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes at the upper levels of their standards. Many states addressed the teaching context by:																				
Adding standards for planning and/or preparation time		✓	✓				✓					✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	
Altering staff evaluation		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Improving staff benefits		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
2. Embedding Continuous Quality Improvement. States are re-visioning the "I" in QRIS and incorporating Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI).																				
		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓		✓		
3. Bringing Together Child Care, Head Start and Pre-K. States are refining, establishing and tracking the participation of cross-sector programs to understand how the cross-sector framework is working. States are:																				
Increasing participation of market-based child care programs in QRIS.		✓					✓	✓			✓		✓			✓		✓	✓	
Engaging state-funded Pre-K, Head Start, and/or nationally accredited centers in their QRIS			✓					✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓					
Building the infrastructure and administrative capacity to slowly grow participation in all settings	✓							✓				✓								
Targeting regulation-exempt family providers									✓											
4. Reaching Children with High Needs. States are ensuring policy and supports focus on building quality early learning for various populations of children at risk. State efforts are:																				
Focusing on children with disabilities, others on English language learners and several focusing on reaching low-income children			✓		✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓			✓	

STATE EXAMPLES	CA	CO	DE	GA	IL	KY	MA	MD	MI	MN	NC	NM	OH	OR	PA	RI	VT	WA	WI	
5. Revisiting Rating. States are experimenting with approaches to rating.																				
				✓			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	
6. Trying New Tools. States are diversifying the number and use of research-based observational tools and revising the frequency aspects to be maintained.																				
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7. Engaging Families. States are enhancing families' decision-making information, engaging families in evaluation how services are working for them and supporting families as critical players in the early development of their children by:																				
Reaching out to families through media, community information distribution, using marketing materials and online and social media tools	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓					✓				✓	
Providing information in multiple language to assist non-English speaking families		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
8. Implementing Financing Strategies. States are trying financing strategies aligned with the goals of QRIS to improve services and outcomes for children by:																				
Establishing multiple financial rewards and incentives			✓												✓				✓	
Creating new financial incentives to serve infants and toddlers			✓								✓					✓				
Supporting discounted access to supplies and equipment or providing targeted awards			✓	✓				✓		✓					✓				✓	
Implementing tiered reimbursement as a dominant financing strategy incentive in 13 of the ELC states.		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
9. Focus and Funding for Teaching and Learning. States are adding financing to support their new, more rigorous standards that focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes. This support is outpacing investment in teacher compensation and it includes:																				
Financing curriculum and assessment implementation			✓					✓		✓										
Providing bonuses for credentials				✓				✓						✓	✓					✓

About the Author



Debi Mathias serves as the Director of the QRIS National Learning Network with the BUILD Initiative, a broad, cross-section of partners at the state and national level focused on early learning systems building, including the development and implementation of quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). From 2005 - 2012, Debi was Director of Early Learning Services, Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), Departments of Education and Human Services, in Pennsylvania. Her responsibilities included leadership and support of teams charged with the design, implementation and monitoring of a variety of programs and initiatives including Keystone STARS, family support programs, the state pre-k program, state Head Start and Collaboration Office, professional development systems, standards-aligned systems, and quality program evaluation and research. Prior to her years at OCDEL, Debi started what became a multi-site NAEYC-accredited early care and education program that grew to serve over 800 children. She was the program director there for 27 years.

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BUILD Initiative Credits

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