



EXECUTIVE
Chapter
1
SUMMARY

**State Systems Building
Through Governance**

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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

States participating in the Early Learning Challenge (ELC) are actively using their governance structures to make sure that governance advances—rather than impedes—the mission to foster a strong early learning system that improves outcomes for low-income, at-risk children.

Harriet Dichter is an attorney and a long-time, nationally-recognized leader in the field of early learning. Late in 2014 she interviewed 14 representatives from ELC states Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Ohio, Oregon, Washington and Wisconsin about their efforts to improve state governance.

The Early Learning Challenge came at a time when many state leaders had already recognized the importance of linking all early learning services to one another as well as to other early childhood services and were discovering gaps in their coordination of these services. The ELC did not explicitly require states to change their governance structures, but it did require that key executive branch functions work together. All the leaders interviewed for this chapter elected to work on governance because they believe it is essential to producing improved outcomes for children.

Three types of governance structure emerged in the states interviewed for this chapter.

The Governor’s Office coordinates work across state agencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illinois • Ohio
One Executive Agency coordinates the work of peer state agencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado • Wisconsin
All work is consolidated in a single Agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maryland • Oregon • Washington

The states that consolidated are convinced that their governance structures enable them to develop new and more robust strategies for early childhood, improved partnerships with health, higher education, and K-12, for example.

Some of the trends Dichter observed:

- **For states already moving to consolidate governance functions, the Early Learning Challenge accelerated momentum.**
- **Colorado** made progress toward its goal of consolidating governance functions in its Department of Human Services. **Ohio** created a new position for a policy leader in the Governor's office. Oregon consolidated eight independent stakeholder groups into one.
- **The ELC accelerated progress in connecting state and local leaders through local coalitions.** State leaders share a common understanding that the system as a whole benefits from having local stakeholders take on leadership roles and influence policy and program.
- **The ELC helped states expand stakeholder involvement, often in collaboration with the state's Early Learning Council.** All the states Dichter interviewed concurred that stakeholders add value to the process of improving outcomes for children and reported increasing the number and broadening the diversity of stakeholders.
- **Improved governance becomes a foundation for better service to children and their families by means of policy integration.** Integrating policies, i.e. eliminating duplicate policies and resolving conflicts between overlapping policies, is necessary and beneficial when a number of agencies have set policies independently of each other. Integrating policies and improving coordination among services for young children enables states to focus on the whole child and all the supports a low-income family needs. This section highlights four areas where improved governance facilitated policy integration and coordination:
 - o **Within their early learning systems**, states looked first to their Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) to propagate improvements. **Washington** designed a strategic plan around families that need full-day, full-year care and learning for their young children. The state expanded the scope of its QRIS to include child care licensing, tuition assistance, and its pre-k program. **Colorado** scoured its QRIS for duplicate policies. A similar effort in **Illinois** made it possible to set universal standards rather than standards tied to funding source. **Maryland** designed incentives for child care providers to participate in its QRIS and improve the quality of their programs. **Maryland** is also rewriting its licensing standards to incorporate more quality predictors. Ohio is rewriting licensing standards, and it now has an integrated data set, which allows various agencies to present information to parents in a consistent way.
 - o **Higher education** is critical to developing a workforce that is skilled in providing high-quality early care and learning. **Illinois** and **Maryland** both invested in their state universities for the purpose of engaging faculty in the process of improving the education of early learning providers. **Illinois** is also articulating a training path for all early learning teachers that combines key elements from traditional teacher certification with early learning credentials.
 - o Some state leaders believe that families are better served when states **look at early education through a P-3 lens**—infancy through third grade—rather than the conventional birth-through-five and K – 12 approach. **Colorado** and **Maryland** are both taking this approach. In Maryland the early childhood office is part of the Department of Education. The state superintendent has mandated that early learning, elementary, and secondary offices all address issues such as standards, teacher effectiveness, and child assessments in order to create a coherent framework.
 - o Many states have launched projects to **link early learning with child health**. These efforts are the subject of Chapter 3. From the perspective of governance, **Oregon** and **Washington** brought together early learning and public health agencies to develop common goals; and **Wisconsin** used ELC funds to create a health and wellness staff position within the state's child and family agency.





- **The ELC helped states build the capacity for greater operating effectiveness.** The most common trend is the deployment of cross-agency management teams who are delegated the authority for making a variety of decisions. Because they are “close to the ground” and have diverse composition, these teams can make good decisions efficiently.

States have also worked to deepen their expertise and reset priorities in order to improve service delivery. Family engagement is one example. **Ohio** elevated family engagement by setting up a collaboration between the Governor’s office and an executive branch agency to oversee this issue. **Wisconsin** used ELC funds to create dedicated positions for family engagement policy and program analysis.

Maryland elevated its QRIS, which had been somewhat “buried” in its organizational hierarchy, to reflect the strategic importance of the QRIS to improved service delivery.

With respect to sustaining improvements in state governance after federal funding goes away, states expressed two concerns:

1. Those that used ELC funds to create new state leadership positions face the challenge of finding state

(or other) funds to sustain these positions. Some states, however, are cross-training agency staff so that all functions can be performed even if a position must be eliminated.

“ Leaders place a priority on their policy agenda—achieving quality services for children—and see governance as a means to realize their policy agenda.

2. Most of the states expressed frustration, of varying degree, that the ELC timeline is too short to allow for meaningful changes to take effect in state government and the broader community. Changes that states believe may exceed the four-to-five year ELC timeline:

- Completing the transformation of a fragmented state authority for early childhood to a centralized structure
- Bringing private child care businesses into a public-private partnership
- Cultivating state leaders with deep expertise in implementation and other strategic skills

State leaders noted that the ELC helped to change the conversation with the legislature, bringing significantly better awareness and understanding and, for some, early wins in terms of expanding investment in the early learning system. The ELC has already facilitated constructive conversations with legislators. Likewise, all the states expressed confidence that the ELC priorities had become state priorities and these priorities would be sustained beyond the grant funding.



About the Author

Harriet Dichter has a multi-decade track record of innovation, partnership, and accountability in early childhood—at the local, state and national levels. As Pennsylvania’s founding Deputy Secretary, Office of Child Development and Early Learning, she gained national attention for the state’s unique new solutions and partnerships. As founding Executive Director, Delaware Office of Early Learning, she accelerated the pace, quality, and accountability of the state’s comprehensive work in early childhood. In the national non-profit and foundation sector, she served as a leader for the Ounce of Prevention Fund and its policy advocacy affiliate, the First Five Years Fund, and worked as staff at the Pew Charitable Trusts. At the community level, she developed her policy, planning, implementation, leadership and advocacy skills in diverse organizations including local government, where she directed the Maternal and Child Health Office of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health; United Way, a child policy and advocacy non-profit; and legal services. Harriet is a graduate of Yale (B.A. *summa cum laude*) and the University of Pennsylvania Law School (J.D. *cum laude*).

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