



EXECUTIVE  
Chapter  
**2**  
SUMMARY

**Local Systems Building  
Through Coalitions**

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*Karen Ponder  
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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

The overarching goal of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (ELC) grant is to close the educational gap between young children with high needs and their peers, by supporting state efforts to build strong systems that provide better access to high quality programs for the children who need these most. This chapter examines eight states that engaged local leaders, through a coalition strategy, to expand local systems planning efforts and align local planning and service delivery with state goals.



Karen Ponder, an early childhood leader with intensive state and national leadership experience with all aspects of early care and education policy and service delivery, conducted interviews with leaders whose states represented all three rounds of ELC grants. Most already had local coalitions supporting state early learning and development initiatives. Three states created new local structures and partnerships as shown (New) below.

Year of ELC Funding			
2012		2013	2014
California	North Carolina	Oregon	Georgia (New)
Delaware (New)	Washington		Vermont
Maryland (New)			

One of the most important strategies for building sustainable local coalitions that Ponder observed is to engage the larger community to value and support them. States with formal local structures that have been in place for a number of years have seen that the interest and engagement of the broader community, including business leadership,

foundations, faith communities and others, can lead to joint investments, joint funding and local responsibility for the coalition's long term success.

Ponder also observed 12 additional strategies that states converged on.

Cross-Cutting Strategies in Local Coalitions									
Strategy	Total	CA	DE	GA	MD	NC	OR	VT	WA
1. Orient local coalitions to support state goals and objectives	All	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Prioritize children with high needs, high risk	All	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. All sectors involved (families, ECE, K-12, health, human services)	All	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Educate and engage the public in local communities	All	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Involve and engage families	All	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Reach out to families to connect them with services	6/8	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
7. Coordinates services	7/8		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Involve local coalitions in quality improvement	5/8	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
9. Involve local coalitions in designing and/or implementing Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)	3/8	✓		✓	✓				
10. Informs state of local lessons and makes recommendations	4/8		✓	✓		✓			✓
11. Use data for decision-making, quality improvement	3/8					✓	✓		✓
12. Create links between early learning & K-12	2/8		✓	✓	✓				

Four major findings characterize Ponder's observations about the work of the states.

## Alignment Between State and Local Systems Leads to More Effective Services

System alignment begins with setting common goals at state and local levels and measuring progress against goals. Some states are creating local systems with administration and implementation responsibilities. Others are creating coalitions that bring together stakeholders to reach out to their communities and improve the coordination of services. States are devising a variety of tools and methods to establish and maintain alignment.

### Coordinated Data

**Vermont** Local programs are required to update the state's comprehensive early childhood database (part of a data system still under construction) so that the state can track all young children to make sure they are holistically prepared for kindergarten.

**Maryland** requires local advisory councils to create annual action plans consistent with the state's priorities on supporting low-income children, children with disabilities, and English-Language Learners. **Oregon** conducts annual reviews of regional plans, checking for alignment with state plans and negotiating outcomes to be achieved by the regional hubs.

**Vermont** also reviews regional action plans for alignment with the state plan. **Washington's** Early Learning Coalitions are educating parents and early learning providers about kindergarten readiness and how to prepare children for WaKIDS, the state's kindergarten entrance assessment. The coalitions place particular emphasis on math skills because these were found to be deficient throughout the state.

” The success of local coalitions rests, in part, on the individuals who lead them, including their vision and the ability to translate that vision into action.

## Policy Feedback and Communication Loops

North Carolina created a practice-to-policy feedback loop to facilitate alignment between the state and counties. Counties in the state's Transformation Zone have successfully used this mechanism to ask for exceptions that better serve the needs of parents in their communities. Georgia has established transformation zones and is in the process of creating a bottom-up system in which families will have input into the design of local practices so that state policy-makers will understand local needs.

### Joint Meetings and Unified Policies

In **Maryland** local councils implement the policies and strategies set by the state's Early Learning Advisory Council. Local councils' bylaws are identical to the state's, and state and local councils keep in touch through joint meetings. **Delaware** wrote a strategic plan for the state that guides both state and local activities. Local consortia in **California** organized their action plans around ELC priorities and developed tasks and timelines similar to the state's ELC scope of work.

## States Invest in Local Leadership Development

The success of local coalitions rests in part on the individuals who lead them. Local leaders must be able to articulate their visions, translate vision into action plans, and assemble diverse work groups to achieve common goals. Half of the states Ponder interviewed have created training and development opportunities for local coalition leaders. **Maryland** partnered with a private foundation to provide 10 days of leadership training for five to six people from each local council's steering committee. The in-depth training included results-based facilitation and accountability. **North Carolina** invests in an intensive Leaders Collaborative that offers specialized training in 1) driving results-based accountability; 2) leading for equity and closing the gap on disparities; and 3) building collaborative leadership. The Leadership Collaborative is available to all local leaders in North Carolina. **Vermont** has created a Technical Assistance Bank to provide technical assistance, training, and support for its 12 regional councils, with the goal of developing local leaders to act as neutral, non-partisan conveners, connectors,





collaborators, and communicators. **Oregon** and **North Carolina** both meet with local coalitions on a regular basis and allow time for skill building and two-way communications during these sessions.

## Developing Local Capacity Requires Time and Attention

Infrastructure must be in place before local coalitions can deliver high-quality, evidence-based programs and services that improve child outcomes; and “infrastructure” includes the networks that connect local coalition members with each other and their counterparts in state governance. All the states using ELC funds to build and support local coalitions report that the structural development of these coalitions is one of their biggest wins to date. The process of organizing local coalitions, engaging or re-engaging partners, understanding the needs of young children in local jurisdictions and developing local plans of action all take time, tailored attention and strong support from the state level.

Two strategies are helping states develop local capacity. **North Carolina, Oregon, and Vermont** all have legislation in place that legitimizes and empowers local structures. Washington was able to codify its local coalitions as part of the State Advisory Council. All states consider the linkages between early learning and K-3 important for young children and families and are working to create those linkages. **Delaware** and **Maryland** view their ELC work as building an intentional foundation between early learning and K to 3 education systems.

## Sustainability Requires Planning

Leaders in all the states interviewed by Ponder recognized from the beginning that thoughtful planning would be required to sustain the improved infrastructure they developed with ELC funds.

## Engaging a Broad Constituency

Many state leaders expressed the hope that the coalitions which have been adopted by local communities are now perceived as a necessary and integral part of the equitable, comprehensive early learning systems in their states.

## Creating Intentional Communication and Support

Public communication and local educational opportunities are key to engaging a broad constituency to support local early learning coalitions. In **North Carolina**, where a system of local coalitions has been in place for some time, community support enabled the local coalitions to implement the state’s prekindergarten program successfully and in a timely manner. **Washington’s** early learning coalitions are also playing an important role in that state’s pre-k program.

## Funding the Ongoing Operations of Local Coalitions

States have pursued a variety of sources to fund the ongoing operations of their local coalitions. **Delaware** has secured private funding and is working to increase partnerships with the public school system that could result in joint funding. **Georgia** is going after private funding with the rationale that improvements to the early learning system are necessary to promote economic development. **Maryland** is helping its local councils embed their work more deeply into their communities as a way to demonstrate even more value. **North Carolina, Oregon and Vermont** have state budget line items to support the ongoing work of local coalitions. Washington also has state funding from a combination of sources including a public-private partnership. **California** has a stable funding source created through its Proposition 10.

## Using Data to Demonstrate Progress

All the ELC states are working to improve the data systems that allow (or will allow) them to track children from prenatal to college and provide aggregate data to support decisions by policy makers. **Delaware** created a data dashboard that pulls data about the progress of ELC initiatives from multiple sources. It will eventually be populated from the state’s integrated early childhood database. **Vermont** has a plan to create a single longitudinal data system by the end of the ELC grant.



## About the Author



Karen W. Ponder is an early childhood consultant whose work focuses on building comprehensive state early childhood systems. She is the former President and CEO of the North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc. She helped to create Smart Start and administered it at the state level and provided guidance to community partnerships for 15 years. Karen has been involved in all aspects of early care and education, as a teacher, center director, board member, teacher educator and government policy maker. She graduated *summa cum laude* from North Carolina State University and also studied at Anderson University and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

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