



EXECUTIVE  
Chapter  
**5**  
SUMMARY

**P-3 Reform in Vision  
and in Practice**

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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.



Harriet Dichter  
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## Executive Summary

Recognizing the many benefits of early childhood educational experiences, the Early Learning Challenge (ELC) encouraged state policymakers to design systems that carry these benefits into the early elementary grades. This encouragement grew stronger over the three rounds of ELC competition. In the first and second rounds of the ELC, initiated in 2011 and 2012, states were allowed to invest ELC funds to address early learning into elementary school years but did not receive any credit for developing a plan for this “invitational” priority. By the third round of the competition, released in 2013, this area was elevated to a “competitive preference priority area,” giving states the option to earn points for “creating preschool through third grade approaches to sustain improved early learning outcomes through the early elementary grades.”

Significantly, all the states that received funding in the third round of ELC competition wrote to this area.

### A Note About P-3

“P-3,” as used in this chapter, represents educationally-oriented services for children from birth through third grade. Within the early childhood field, the phrases and terms “Pre-K-3,” “0-8,” and “birth to third grade” are used to represent similar constructs but may include different age spans and, therefore, a narrower or broader set of services.

” The nation’s Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge (ELC) competition has been an historic investment of federal funding to help states build systems and services that support children in their earliest years.

Kate Tarrant, Ed.D, an early childhood research and policy consultant who is an expert on comprehensive early childhood systems, researched 10 states that received ELC funds to implement P-3 innovations. Her research included the review of key documents and interviews with leaders in some of the following states: Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Washington.

All of these states implemented programs that have had broad impact. One state leader reported that the ELC P-3 work has transformed how leaders from all sectors conceptualize early childhood policy and practice. Tarrant’s analysis led to eight major findings.

## P-3 Reforms Are Expanding ELC States' Early Childhood Systems

State leaders indicate that the ELC has provided key resources to help states build stronger connections between early childhood and early elementary school structures and services, thus expanding their conceptualization of early childhood policy and practice.

## States Are Adopting a Localized Approach to P-3 Reform

Eight of the 10 states Tarrant researched devolved planning and implementation of P-3 initiatives to community-based early learning coalitions, recognizing that local coalitions would best be able to tailor solutions to their unique local cultures, resources, schools, programs, families, children and priorities. Most of these states required the local coalitions to demonstrate buy-in from stakeholders across community-based organizations, early childhood programs, public schools, and other child and family agencies. Several of the states addressed issues of equity in their implementation of ELC innovations. Taken together, the states Tarrant researched are providing funding and support to more than 100 local communities.

Many beneficial programs emerged from the localization strategy. In **Delaware**, 20 *DEL Readiness TEAMS* are charged explicitly with P-3 reforms. Many focus on transitions for families as children move from early learning into kindergarten.

A family member on one planning team suggested a bookmobile carrying titles appropriate for the P-3 age range. New partnerships formed to make the grassroots idea a reality, and now the community is raising funds to sustain the



bookmobile. In **Massachusetts**, 13 *Birth to Grade Three Communities* develop local plans and receive funding and technical assistance from the state. In Boston, the K1DS initiative, which combines ELC funds with philanthropic investments, has expanded prekindergarten to serve children in 14 communities. K1DS also provides professional development for Boston public school teachers to support continuity between early childhood and early elementary services. Lowell, Massachusetts has selected common improvement tools for family child care, community-based preschools, and elementary schools and is using these tools to inform unified professional development. The localized strategy has also helped to target ELC resources to reach children from families that have characteristics that place them at risk for poor school achievement. When **Georgia** established its *Early Education Empowerment Zones (E3Zs)*, the first criteria was the density of children from disadvantaged families. **North Carolina's** Transformation Zones lie in relatively poor rural counties.

## ELC States Are Engaging Instructional Leaders with Cross-Sector Professional Development

“Public-private funding partnerships have strengthened P-3 efforts.”

At least four of the ELC states have implemented professional development programs designed to bring together P-3 leaders, i.e. elementary school principals, leaders of community-based early childhood programs and other leaders invested in P-3 reform. Together they learn about best practices and opportunities to sustain early learning benefits into the early elementary grades. **Maryland** has reached about 600 educators who participate in teams of six (three from the school, including the principal, and three from early learning programs). In **Massachusetts**, 300 leaders have participated in its birth-to-eight leadership series. **Pennsylvania** expects to reach 3,000 educators by 2017 with its four-day leadership institutes. In 2014 alone, more than 500 education professionals participated in **Washington's** *Starting Strong Institutes*, which engage leaders in learning about the birth-to-eight developmental continuum.

## States Are Aligning Formative Assessments

Through the ELC, states are developing and implementing comprehensive assessments in birth-to-five programs as well as Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEAs). The concurrent development or expansion of these assessments creates an opportunity to align expectations between early childhood and the elementary school years.

States are investing in complementary early childhood and kindergarten assessments. For example, **Delaware's** KEA is a customized version of the formative assessment used in the birth-to-five programs. Additionally, the implementation of KEAs has generated meaningful and mutually beneficial dialogue among early childhood and elementary school leaders. The **Washington** Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS) program has a goal of building relationships between early learning providers and kindergarten teachers so that children will have a smooth transition into kindergarten. **New Jersey's** KEA serves as the foundation for the state's "Kindergarten Seminar," a professional development series for kindergarten teachers and principals.

In the past, some early learning leaders have found it difficult to engage K-12 leaders; however, the successful rollout of the KEA depends on buy-in from K-12 stakeholders, including district administrators, principals, teachers and unions. In ELC states, the momentum of the KEA implementation seems to be breaking down barriers and building new bridges between the early learning and K-12 sectors.

## Funding Partnerships Drive P-3 Reform

Several ELC leaders noted that public-private funding partnerships have strengthened P-3 efforts. Specifically, **Delaware, Maryland** and **Washington** are blending ELC funds with private philanthropic investments. Bringing public and private dollars together engages a broader group of stakeholders and increases the likelihood that the work will be sustained beyond the duration of the grant. The ELC encouraged states to develop KEAs using federal or state funds from outside the grant. **New Jersey's** Department of Education funds the state's KEA and a staff position devoted to directing P-3 work.

## Experts Accelerate P-3 Knowledge Transfer

Partnerships with experts from national organizations are accelerating states' P-3 efforts. **Massachusetts** and **Pennsylvania** both report using materials, staff, and/or technical assistance from national organizations to support their P-3 work. With these resources, in-state leaders acquire the expertise to continue the reforms.

## ELC States Document and Evaluate Their Work

Four ELC states are working with third-party researchers to document and/or evaluate the work of their local coalitions so that lessons learned can inform future policymaking. **Massachusetts** hired a consultant to develop a website to track, profile and analyze its "Birth-Third" initiatives. **Delaware** has an evaluation team capturing the successes of its local coalitions. **Pennsylvania** built research into its plans primarily to learn about the process of systems-building work. **Georgia** hopes its evaluation will help it learn how to scale the work of its birth-to-eight teams.

## ELC States Are Building Capacity to Implement P-3 Reforms

ELC state leaders reported that they are working to develop capacity to implement P-3 reforms. States are developing capacity to address the challenge of dissimilar organizational structures. Early learning policies are usually set at the state level and involve multiple agencies while K-12 decision making is typically devolved to local school districts. ELC leaders are active in addressing this challenge through relationship building and flexible implementation. States report that they are fostering policy coherence. State leaders from **New Jersey** and **Washington** both expressed concern that stakeholders, especially those in public schools, might experience "initiative fatigue" in the absence of a clear picture about how Common Core, KEA, and new K-12 teacher evaluations all fit together and are actively addressing this policy challenge. The sustainability of P-3 reforms also presents a challenge but state leaders are hopeful, in part, because new partnerships have been formed to fund or otherwise support the innovations local coalitions put in place. Because the ELC laid out the expectation for KEAs to be funded outside the grant, some sustainable funding is already in place. The KEAs also lay the foundation for public school involvement in early education.



## Looking Forward

Tarrant concludes with a call to action based on insights she gained from her investigation. To scale their innovations and use resources efficiently, states will need to engage in ongoing evaluations of the programs they implement and share lessons learned to discover the most effective strategies to sustain early learning into the elementary grades. States, too, will need to deepen their approach to equity within P-3 reforms. States will also need to assure appropriate state and local capacity to continue the development of the P-3 approach throughout their states. There is momentum among the states that took up the P-3 challenge. The ELC has helped to build the structures and forge the partnerships needed to connect the early childhood and early elementary school systems. Indeed, a broader vision of the early childhood system that includes early elementary school is taking hold at the federal level and in states and communities that have benefited from ELC support.

## About the Author



**Kate Tarrant** is an independent early childhood research and policy consultant whose recent clients include the BUILD Initiative, New York State's Early Childhood Advisory Council, American Institutes for Research, and other national, state, and local organizations. Her work focuses on comprehensive early childhood systems, workforce development, and quality improvement policy. She has authored numerous policy briefs, book chapters, and articles on these topics. Tarrant earned a doctorate in education from Teachers College, Columbia University and a Masters Degree in Public Administration from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

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