



EXECUTIVE
Chapter
6
SUMMARY

**Improving Systems of Learning Through the
Use of Child Standards and Assessments**

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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
General Manager and Editor, *Rising to the Challenge*



Susan G. Hibbard
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Executive Summary

Together Catherine Scott-Little, Ph.D., Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Kelly L. Maxwell, Ph.D., Co-Director of Early Childhood Development at Child Trends, investigated eight states' development and implementation of child standards and assessments through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (ELC): California, Colorado, Delaware, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island and Washington.

Scott-Little and Maxwell have organized this chapter around findings and recommendations in two areas: 1) Standards and Assessments in the Birth through Five System, and 2) Kindergarten Entry Assessments. Their nine findings and three recommendations are highlighted below.

Standards and Assessments: Birth through Five

- 1. States' ELC efforts with standards and formative assessment build on their previous work.** Most states had already developed Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) and were supporting, to some degree, the use of instructional assessment in some early childhood classrooms (e.g., in pre-kindergarten). The ELC work has focused on enriching ELDS professional development and expanding the use of standards and assessment
- 2. ELDS serve as the foundation of the early care and ECE system.** ELDS articulate the goals the state has adopted for children's learning and are, therefore, the underpinning of many components of ECE systems. For example, some state leaders described their standards as the "glue" that holds together all of their professional development or the "center" that is used to align their workforce competencies.
- 3. As a mechanism to promote the use of ELDS and formative assessments, states are infusing requirements related to standards and assessment into their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).** States have incorporated requirements to promote the use of ELDS and formative assessments into their QRIS, such as requirements for professional development, use of aligned curricula, etc.
- 4. States are integrating standards and formative assessment through professional development.** Even though states may have developed their standards and selected their formative assessments through two separate processes, they are addressing implementation of standards and assessments together by covering both jointly in professional development.

5. **States are extending professional development to go deeper and reach broader target audiences.** Although awareness of the standards and formative assessment tools is an important first step in understanding and using them, state leaders recognize that more in-depth support is needed for teachers to use them to enrich instruction and support children’s development. State leaders also recognize that the people who provide professional development and program administrators also need support to help teachers use the standards and assessment.
6. **States have used a variety of strategies to sustain the momentum of advances made through ELC.** These states have used several different strategies to maximize impact beyond the life of the ELC , including developing resources that will exist beyond the grant and blending ELC funds with existing funding.

Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA)

7. **State approaches to KEA vary in part because KEA sits as the intersection of two systems (i.e. early childhood and K-12 education systems).** Scott-Little and Maxwell observed three primary approaches to KEA development and implementation among the states they researched:
 - a. KEA as an *extension* of the early childhood formative assessment system process, using tools in the KEA that have been used in early childhood settings;
 - b. KEA as the *beginning* of a K-3 formative assessment process to guide instruction from kindergarten through third grade; and
 - c. KEA as a transition process to support children’s successful *transition* from early learning to public school.
8. **States’ KEA efforts are advancing the field of assessment** through, for example, increased work to address the reliability and validity of assessment data, the expansion of existing assessment tools to cover a broader age range, and attention to developing tools that address multiple purposes.

States are rolling out professional development in phases. Many are focusing first on supporting kindergarten teachers’ use of the assessment tool and then broadening the content (e.g., how to use the data gathered, the link between assessment and instruction) and the target audience (e.g., administrators as well as teachers).

10. **The use of assessment in the K-12 system is impacting the KEA.** Educators, policymakers, and parents around the U.S. are debating the growing role of assessment in the K-12 system. In this context, states face challenges as they develop and implement the KEA, an additional assessment.

Recommendations

Scott-Little and Maxwell offer three recommendations to states beginning or continuing work on standards and assessments. These recommendations incorporate their reflections on what they heard in their interviews as well as their prior experience working with states.

1. **Take steps toward fundamental and long-term systemic changes to support effective use of standards and assessments.** Effective use of standards and assessments is not just about use of the tools. More fundamentally, the reforms related to the use of ELDS and assessments are designed to go deeper and to change instructional practices within the field. Therefore, it will take a long time and require significant and systemic changes to incorporate standards and formative assessments into practice.
2. **Strive for continuity between formative assessments conducted in early learning settings and the KEA, but keep in mind the differences in the two systems.** The increasing focus on formative assessments to guide instruction prior to and at the beginning of kindergarten may boost efforts to adopt a birth-to-third-grade approach and encourage more individualized instruction. Coordinated planning will benefit children, but states should not lose sight of the fact that the B-5 and K-12 systems are structured differently and each has unique features, especially with respect to professional development.
3. **Champion and safeguard the quality of KEA data.** Some KEA data are supposed to be entered into the K-12 State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS). State leaders must ensure that the KEA data are reliable and valid before they are used to make decisions or entered into the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS). The authors suggest implementing the KEA for at least three years before entering it into the SLDS. Additional strategies are offered in the full chapter.



About the Authors



Catherine Scott-Little, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she teaches in the Birth through Kindergarten Teacher Licensure program. Catherine provided

technical assistance to states developing ELC applications through the Early Learning Challenge Collaborative and has collaborated on numerous studies to document and evaluate how states have developed and implemented both Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) and assessment systems. She also provides technical assistance to states on issues related to standards and assessments.



Kelly L. Maxwell, Ph.D., is a Co-Director of Early Childhood Development at Child Trends. She has 20 years of experience in early childhood policy, research, and evaluation. Her areas of expertise include early childhood policy issues, Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement

Systems (TQRIS), school readiness assessment, evaluation of early childhood initiatives, and use of administrative

data. Kelly provides support to North Carolina's early childhood advisory council as well as the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. She is also a research partner supporting the 10-state K-3 Formative Assessment Consortium, led by the North Carolina's Office of Early Learning, Department of Public Instruction.

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BUILD Initiative Credits

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