Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families, a BUILD E-Book
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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Improving Systems of Learning Through the Use of Child Standards and Assessments

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Introduction
Standards and child assessment are central to the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (ELC) application and states’ ELC activities because they are at the heart of a strong early childhood system. Standards outline the goals states have set for what children will learn, guide curriculum and instruction, and determine what aspects of children’s learning and development should be assessed. Assessments provide information on children’s learning and development to help teachers gauge how children are making progress on the areas articulated in the standards and guide teachers as they plan instruction and learning experiences. Recognizing the integral role standards and assessments play in early care and education systems, the ELC application asked states to:

- Develop high-quality early learning and development standards (ELDS) that are implemented statewide in all early care and education programs.
- Strengthen early educators’ understanding and use of child assessments.
- Include requirements related to ELDS and assessment of children’s skills within the state’s Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS).
- Implement a comprehensive Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) on a statewide basis.

Standards communicate the hopes for what children know and can do—and assessments are needed to determine which skills children have or are developing. Because the two are so closely tied together, this chapter focuses on both. This chapter describes how ELC states are promoting the use of early learning and development standards, formative assessments, and kindergarten entry assessments through their ELC-funded work, with a focus on ways that the ELC has uniquely contributed to the states’ efforts, as well as how the ELC has built on work that was on-going prior to the ELC grant.

Our Approach
The purpose of this chapter is to describe key aspects of states’ work in ELDS and formative assessment, highlighting lessons learned and considerations for the future. It is not intended to be a comprehensive description of every ELC state’s efforts in this area but instead to illustrate various approaches and issues in these areas, based on information from eight ELC states. The first step in writing this chapter was to determine which ELC states to interview. We selected eight states based on our own knowledge of the work in this area, a review of ELC applications and reports, and consultation with the BUILD team. We wanted to include states that had approached the work differently and offered possible lessons for other states. We invited leaders from the following states to participate in interviews, and all graciously agreed: California, Colorado, Delaware, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington. All of these states were included in the first two rounds of federal ELC grants. We relied on a standard set of questions to guide our interviews and shared the interview notes with interviewees for their review, corrections, or additions. With regard to Ohio’s discussion of its KEA efforts, we note here that the state is working collaboratively with Maryland. Because each state may implement the KEA differently and we did not interview Maryland leaders, we describe in later sections only the work of Ohio as noted by Ohio leaders.

2 The RTT-ELC specified requirements for a comprehensive assessment system, which includes assessments of children for screening and instruction, assessments of classroom quality, and assessments of teacher-child interactions. In this chapter, we focus only on child assessments, and a particular type of child assessment —formative assessment designed to inform or guide instruction. See “Resources,” U.S. Department of Education, accessed April 21, 2015, http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/resources.html.
The information gleaned from the interviews is presented in two separate sections. The first section focuses on standards and assessment in the birth to age five early childhood system. The second section focuses on kindergarten entry assessment within the K-12 system. We summarize the themes that emerged from our interviews with the eight state leaders and provide state examples throughout. The last section of this chapter moves beyond the interviews to offer recommendations in three areas for moving forward with these critical components of a strong early childhood system.

Standards and Assessment in the Birth through Five System

The eight states featured in this chapter have utilized the ELC as an opportunity to move their work on ELDS and assessments forward, accelerating work that was already in process, and expanding the reach of their efforts to providers who might not otherwise have the opportunity to access resources to promote their use of standards and assessments. Based on the experiences of these ELC states, it appears that there are several commonalities in how states have approached their ELDS and formative assessment work.

Finding 1: States’ ELC efforts with standards build on and extend what existed.

For all of these ELC states, the effort to develop and implement ELDS preceded the ELC funding. For most, work was already underway to support the use of instructional assessment in birth to five classrooms. Therefore, the ELC work has often been built on or extended work already in progress. For instance, the majority of the ELC states had completed their ELDS prior to the ELC grant, and did not make changes to the content of their standards as part of the ELC. Rhode Island is an exception, using ELC funds to re-vamp its ELDS from standards that only addressed four-year-olds to ELDS that provide a continuum from birth through age five. Because the Rhode Island team felt that the ELDS were fundamental to all other efforts to support improvements in early care and education within its state, the ELDS revision process was first on its agenda when Rhode Island started its ELC grant. New Mexico used funds to update its ELDS, primarily the standards for pre-kindergarten age children. The remaining states had already revised or

Key ELC Contributions to States’ Work on Child Standards and Child Assessments

The Early Learning Challenge provided the impetus and resources for states to make great strides in their standards and assessment work. Although the ELC contributed to states’ systems-building efforts in a number of ways, three distinct contributions to states’ work in standards and assessment include:

1. **Expertise.** The ELC provided important resources that enabled state leaders to add expertise to their efforts. This could be in the form of an expert advisory group on content, like North Carolina’s K-3 Assessment Think Tank, or a contract with a research organization to help conduct the work. The ELC afforded states an opportunity to call upon a depth of expertise and technical assistance to strengthen their work and their own team’s capacity to address the complex issues related to standards and assessment.

2. **Technology infrastructure.** The ELC allowed states to develop data systems, web platforms, and web-based resources that supported the development and use of standards and assessment. The technology infrastructure not only helped states accomplish their work during the grant but also contributed to the development of online tools and other strategies that will continue to be used beyond the grant.

3. **Acceleration.** The ELC grants provided a major infusion of funds to kick-start or exponentially accelerate states’ work in standards and assessment. This is especially true for states’ kindergarten entry assessment work. Without the ELC, states would not have had the resources needed to develop new assessments, provide the needed professional development, or implement as quickly or as widely.
updated their ELDS prior to the ELC, and focused instead on implementation efforts.

Leaders from Delaware explained that their state used the ELC to expand and refine their ELDS implementation activities, with broader outreach to providers and families as they used the ELC to make their ELDS more accessible to a wider range of users. California leaders also noted that ELC funds were used to extend ELDS professional development to a broader audience, including Spanish-speaking providers. Colorado, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Washington likewise have used the ELC to make existing professional development on ELDS more widely available and/or create additional professional development to target a broader array of providers. A state leader from New Mexico noted that ELC allowed the state to implement its ELDS on a larger scale than it would have otherwise, pointing out that its implementation would not have been as “robust” without the ELC.

Almost all of these states also chose to use the ELC to build on what already existed within their formative assessment work. Seven states (all but Ohio, a state developing a new assessment) elected to use the ELC opportunity to extend assessment resources/requirements used in the state-funded pre-kindergarten program to other, non pre-k programs. In California, Delaware, Rhode Island, and Washington, state-funded pre-kindergarten programs were already required to conduct formative assessments, with tools/processes already established and professional development provided. These states have moved to incrementally require or encourage other types of programs to use the same assessment tool, or one that is closely aligned with the tool being used in state-funded programs for pre-kindergarten children. For instance, Colorado used ELC funds to provide its well-known “Results Matter” assessment materials and training to non-school-based providers who previously did not have access to the assessment resources.

Washington and Rhode Island negotiated with the assessment vendor to make the assessment used in pre-kindergarten programs available to non-pre-kindergarten programs at the same cost by extending their contract agreements to cover other providers. Washington also invited non-pre-kindergarten providers to attend the state’s formative assessment training on a space-available basis, and New Mexico used the ELC to extend the existing pre-kindergarten assessment resources to child care providers. In Delaware, state-funded pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs already received support to implement formative assessment. ELC funds were used to introduce requirements regarding formative assessment into the state’s Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS).
Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS), extend professional development to child care programs, and provide coaching to child care sites. Professional development on formative assessment is also being extended to additional types of programs in each of the other states. These seven ELC states were further along in their efforts to support the use of formative assessments within pre-kindergarten programs, and they have capitalized on ELC efforts to extend assessment resources to other providers.

Finding 2: ELDS serve as the foundation of the ECE system.

ELDS, which articulate the state’s vision for what children should know and be able to do, serve as the foundation for many other aspects of the ECE system. Many of the states acknowledged the importance of ELDS within their efforts to improve the quality of care children receive. In North Carolina, the ELDS were described as the “glue” that pulls together all the professional development efforts offered through the child care system because all professional development has to relate back to its ELDS. California leaders described their ELDS as the “center” of the integrated system they are trying to establish, and professional development, assessments, curricula and other requirements must be consistent with their ELDS.

States have taken a number of steps to build on ELDS as the foundation of their early care and education systems. For instance, Rhode Island conducted analyses to assure that its Workforce Competencies, which describe expectations for what teachers should know and be able to do, are aligned with its ELDS. The state took steps to ensure that its licensing, QRIS, and state pre-k program standards support the use of its ELDS, and is working with its formative assessment vendor to adapt the data summary reports so that child outcomes can be reported using language representing its ELDS rather than the assessment’s standard metrics. Delaware also completed analyses of its state’s Workforce Competencies, syllabi used in higher education settings, and its high school early childhood curriculum to ascertain the extent to which these supports were aligned with its ELDS. Although most of the states’ efforts focused on professional development to support the use of ELDS, states have also paid attention to aligning other requirements such as Workforce Competencies and professional development resources with the ELDS to further promote their use.

Finding 3: Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are a mechanism to promote the rise of ELDS and formative assessments.

One particularly significant effort to place ELDS at the center of the early care and education system is the way that states have begun to infuse requirements related to the ELDS and also requirements related to child assessments within Quality Rating and Improvement Systems. Consistent with the ELC emphasis on the use of (Tiered) Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to promote implementation of ELDS and formative assessments, each of these states include requirements (or, in one case, the state is considering requirements) for programs to use ELDS and formative assessments within their QRIS. At the lower levels within the QRIS, programs typically are required to demonstrate that their staff has been trained on the ELDS and on formative assessments. At the highest levels, credit may be given to programs that document they are using the ELDS and formative assessments, for selecting the same tool used in the pre-kindergarten program (or a tool that is aligned with the pre-kindergarten program’s tool), and/or implementing a curriculum that is aligned with the ELDS. For example, in Delaware, programs are required to use approved curricula that are aligned with the state’s ELDS and to conduct formative assessments in order to maintain the highest levels within the QRIS. Similarly, starting January 2016, programs will be required to conduct formative assessments at the two highest levels within the QRIS. Other states have incentivized the use of the ELDS and formative assessment by offering additional points to programs that document staff has been trained on the ELDS, is using curricula aligned with the state’s ELDS, and/or is implementing formative assessments.
Finding 4: States are integrating standards and formative assessments through professional development.

Although states often developed their ELDS and selected their formative assessments in two separate processes, evidence from our interviews suggests that states are addressing implementation of standards and assessments together. Over half of the states are integrating their efforts to support the use of ELDS and formative assessments through program requirements and professional development resources that address both. For example, North Carolina, New Mexico, and Rhode Island developed professional development that addresses both ELDS and formative assessment within the same training resource. In North Carolina and New Mexico, coaching/consultation is provided to teachers to help them learn how to use both ELDS and assessments in their instructional planning. California revised its formative assessment so that all domains of the ELDS were represented and aligned; professional development integrates the formative assessment and the ELDS. States are affirming that it is important for providers to learn to use both of these important resources together in order to improve practice.

Finding 5: States are extending professional development to go deeper and reach broader target audiences.

There are commonalities across the states in how professional development efforts to support the use of ELDS and formative assessments have been carried out, with states incrementally going deeper into their support for teachers using formative assessment and extending the professional development to additional target audiences. In addition, over time, states have begun to actively provide ELDS and formative assessment professional development to others, including administrators, coaches, and higher education faculty.

Within these eight states, significant effort has been devoted to “awareness” level training on ELDS and formative assessments. Every state developed professional development to provide basic information on its state's ELDS and on how to administer/implement the formative assessment tool. The states recognized, however, that simply teaching providers about the ELDS or how to implement the formative assessment is not sufficient to promote an intentional approach to using the standards and assessments. In fact, in North Carolina providers who completed the initial awareness-level training expressed strong desire for additional training on how to use the ELDS. Through additional training and sometimes coaching/mentoring, states have more recently begun in-depth support for using standards and assessments in curriculum planning and, often, as mentioned above, the use of standards and assessments is addressed together. California, for example, has invested heavily in professional development resources to promote the use of its ELDS and its formative assessment, using ELC funds to create an online platform to house the modules and other resources that have been developed to provide professional development on its ELDS and assessment.

States have also focused attention on professional development for professional development providers. In addition to or as part of “train-the-trainer” efforts launched in most of the states, a few have implemented specific steps to ensure that the professional development provided is
consistent across the state. For instance, California requires that all professional development providers complete the initial training on its ELDS before providing professional development, coaches trained on its assessment must reach fidelity in delivering the training, and a contractor monitors who has been certified to provide training and conducts random checks to document the fidelity of training provided. Professional development providers in Washington must complete pre-service online modules on a variety of topics, including their state’s core competencies and their ELDS, before they can be state-approved trainers. New Mexico’s professional development is implemented by multiple agencies. To promote consistency, it has developed a basic training that professional development providers from each of the agencies complete, and then they receive additional professional development focused specifically on the priorities of their own agency. The foundational training is intended to ensure that all professional development providers start with the same basic knowledge of their ELDS.

Recognizing that you cannot just train teachers and expect them to use ELDS and assessments effectively, many of these states have expanded their professional development efforts to include administrators. In fact, almost half of the states have developed specialized professional development for administrators (Delaware, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Washington). Rhode Island leaders noted that they learned the importance of having strong administrative support for teachers as they rolled out professional development for them, and that it is essential to support administrators to deepen their understanding of the ELDS and assessment in order for them to fulfill this role. Therefore, they initiated training specifically designed for administrators so that they would be familiar with the ELDS and would understand the assessment instrument and data entry system teachers are using. An added bonus is the fact that administrators often stay in their positions longer than teachers, so Rhode Island leaders felt that the professional development provided for administrators would mean programs would have some stable support for implementation of ELDS and assessments even if teachers leave their positions.

Another target audience that these states are beginning to address is faculty in institutions of higher education. New Mexico is one example of a state that has begun outreach to faculty. This state realized that in-service professional providers were familiar with their ELDS but higher education faculty was not, so it started providing institutes for faculty to provide an orientation and describe how programs are using the ELDS in order to help faculty think about how the ELDS might be used in courses. New Mexico has also been working through an existing task force that includes all colleges and universities in order to coordinate the content of some courses, and providing tools related to the ELDS that faculty could use in their courses. California, Delaware, North Carolina, and Rhode Island have also begun professional development outreach efforts with faculty from institutions of higher education, and California has developed materials faculty can use in their courses.

It appears that initially much attention was focused on efforts to acquaint providers with ELDS and formative assessments. As time has passed, additional professional development has been developed to provide more in-depth guidance on the use of ELDs and assessments in instructional planning, and to support not just teachers but also persons who supervise and support teachers. Given limitations such as personnel and funding, states could not address everything at once and made choices about where to start. It might be logical to conclude that their choices matched the needs of providers, who needed to become familiar with the resources before they could learn to use them.

Finding 6: States have used a variety of strategies to sustain the momentum.

The states included in this chapter have used several different strategies to maximize the chance that the work continues beyond the life of the ELC grant. First, over half of the states have invested in development of resources that will continue after the grant, working to strengthen the early childhood infrastructures in their states. For example, California developed on-line professional development modules and an on-line platform. Colorado printed hard copies of their ELDS and developed a website, a toolkit and
an e-learning course. Delaware created a toolkit to support the use of its ELDS, a professional development module targeted for administrators to support their understanding of formative assessment, and a credential on curriculum and assessment. Ohio has created a new assessment. A few states (Colorado, Delaware and Rhode Island, for instance) have created or expanded database capacity to track child assessment data, and two states (California and Colorado) created or expanded database capacity to track the professional development completed by early educators. Knowing that there will be some on-going costs to maintain the systems but that the on-going maintenance costs will be less than the initial investment to develop the systems, states capitalized on the ELC for resources to fund costly development work on databases that will continue to exist beyond the time of the grant.

Another strategy the states used was to invest ELC funds to develop personnel resources that will continue to exist after the grant. Using a Train-the-Trainer model, states such as California, Delaware, and Ohio have provided specialized professional development for staff and consultants who will continue to provide training and coaching after the grant, using the skills and knowledge they gained through the grant. Although the states will continue to incur personnel costs to deliver the professional development, the costs of personnel development for the trainers was funded through the ELC and the pool of persons with the expertise needed to provide professional development will continue to be a resource to the state. Leaders in these states described the investment in training and professional development for staff and consultants as a way to ensure that the training that they are providing continues beyond the grant.

Leaders from five states indicated that one strategy they are using (or considering) is to blend existing funding with ELC funding to support on-going work. This strategy can build the buy-in and political will needed to ensure on-going support for the work. They have made sure that their states are investing at least some funds that will be available after the conclusion of the grant, with the idea that at least some of the ELC work will continue (and, hopefully, it would be easier to garner additional state funds to continue something that a state is already funding, at least in part, than to obtain state funding for work that previously had no state support). In the case of New Mexico, ELC and state-level funds are being used to fund some of the costs for training and personnel who are coordinating and/or providing professional development. Therefore, New Mexico has a base of state funding to build on and, hopefully, a better chance of sustaining the efforts after the grant. California has also utilized multiple funding sources to support the work, and hopes to continue the ELC-funded work with CCDF quality funds and perhaps some state funding. Delaware is considering the possibility that funds used for incentives as part of its QRIS might be used to continue to incentivize the use of formative assessments once the ELC ends.

Two states (Ohio and Washington) have put forth budget requests for additional state funding in 2015 through 2017 to continue the work. Ohio’s request is for state funds to continue implementation of and supports for its new assessment. In Washington, the request is for funds to continue the state’s efforts to implement the QRIS, which includes support for use of the ELDS and formative assessment. It seems, therefore, that many of these states have strategically used ELC funds to develop resources that will continue to benefit the states after the grant, and a few are already pursuing funding to continue ELC activities.

The ELC is directly responsible for the rapid development of kindergarten entry assessments (KEA) in many states.

Kindergarten Entry Assessment

The ELC is directly responsible for the rapid development of kindergarten entry assessments (KEA) in many states. The ELC strongly incentivized states to develop an assessment of the five domains of development to be conducted at the beginning of kindergarten and used to both guide instruction and inform the early childhood system. Specifically, the application states, “results of the [kindergarten entry] assessment should be used to inform efforts to close the school readiness gap at kindergarten entry and to inform instruction in the early elementary school grades.” Within all of the states that have received ELC funding, a few (e.g., California and Maryland) were pioneers in school readiness assessment and had experience

developing assessments for kindergarten-age children prior to the grant. Many, however, are using the ELC to develop a statewide, comprehensive KEA system. States vary in their approach to KEA. For instance, in a review of the ELC states, 8 were adapting or adopting commercial assessments, 10 were developing or adapting their own state assessments, and 2 were using both commercial and their own assessments.

The general description of the KEA work of the larger group of ELC states provides a backdrop for this section of the chapter. The remaining part of this section focuses only on the information gathered from interviews with the eight states that are the focus of this chapter.

Finding 7: States’ approaches to KEA vary in part because it sits at the intersection of two systems.

The KEA, because of the timing of its administration, sits at the intersection of the early childhood and K-12 education systems. A state’s approach to the development of a KEA varies, in part, based on a philosophical or strategic decision about the role of the KEA in the B-8 continuum. Based on our interviews, we have identified three distinct approaches.

KEA as an Extension of the Early Childhood System. Four states emphasize the KEA as an extension of the early childhood formative assessment system (California, Delaware, Ohio, and Washington). Three of these states used an existing formative assessment tool familiar with—and already in use by—the early childhood community (i.e. Delaware and Washington’s customized version of Teaching Strategies Gold, California’s Desired Results Developmental Profile). Ohio is developing a new KEA that builds on and is closely aligned with the formative assessments used in its early childhood system. States viewing the KEA as an extension of ECE formative assessment may also view the KEA as an opportunity to “push up” early childhood concepts into kindergarten or the early elementary grades. The coverage of five domains instead of one (e.g., language) or two (e.g., language and math) is one example of how the KEA is “pushing up” early childhood concepts.

KEA as the Beginning of a K-3 Formative Assessment. North Carolina has taken a different approach to the KEA. It emphasizes the KEA as the beginning of a K-3 formative assessment system to guide instruction in the early elementary grades, specifically kindergarten through third grade. Rhode Island, Delaware, and seven other states have joined North Carolina in a consortium to expand North Carolina’s ELC K-3 Assessment work with funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Enhanced Assessment Grants. North Carolina leaders envision that the K-3 formative assessment focused on the early elementary grades will be more likely to inform and impact instruction than a single administration of a KEA.

KEA as a Transition Process. Washington is framing its KEA, called WaKIDS (Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills), as a transition process that brings families, the early childhood community, and elementary schools together in understanding children as they enter kindergarten. Its unique approach aims to use the KEA as a vehicle to bring the B-5 and K-3 worlds together, and to connect them with families, to support the
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success of entering kindergartners. Part of the KEA requires kindergarten teachers to meet individually with the families of their new students, to make a connection with the family, gather some information about the child, and begin building a strong relationship. Another aspect of WaKIDS, the early learning collaboration, connects elementary schools with the child care programs in their community to support joint planning across the B-5 and K-12 systems. This approach goes beyond assessing children to provide specific structures to bring people together to support the successful transition of children into kindergarten. Washington's KEA is as much about the process (bringing people together) as it is the product (data about children's development).

While not a separate approach to the KEA, it is worth noting that some states have used the development of the KEA as an opportunity to promote a B-8 continuum more generally. Of the eight states we interviewed, only California has a single assessment tool that cuts across the B-8 age span (California's Desired Results Developmental Profile measures a couple of domains for school-age children served in child care settings). Two additional states we interviewed articulated a strong commitment to the B-8 continuum (Colorado and Delaware). Delaware, for example, has combined its B-5 and K-3 assessment committees so that a birth to third grade committee can continue to address assessment issues beyond the life of the grant. It also is planning professional development activities that will bring teachers from the B-5 and K-2 systems together to discuss standards, curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Colorado described its plans to develop videos of formative assessments that showed children and teachers from both early childhood and K-3 systems. These joint professional development opportunities could help foster a single B-8 system, rather than the two different systems of early childhood and K-3 education.

Finding 8: States’ ELC efforts are advancing the field of assessment.

Across the ELC states that were included in our interviews, some are using their own, previously developed tools (e.g., California's Desired Results Developmental Profile), others are using or adapting an existing tool (e.g., Delaware and Washington's use of Teaching Strategies Gold), and a few are developing new tools (e.g., Ohio's joint effort with Maryland, North Carolina's development of a K-3 Assessment).

We can learn much from these states’ varying approaches to KEA. Ohio's joint effort with Maryland to develop a new KEA provides one example of advancing the field of assessment. They are combining different means of data collection as a way of addressing the multiple purposes of the KEA as specified in the ELC application: to inform instruction in the early elementary grades and to inform the early childhood system. The new assessment tool developed by Ohio (in collaboration with Maryland) includes some observation-based assessment items as well as some one-on-one assessment tasks so that the assessment will yield information to guide classroom instruction while also providing valid, reliable data about children's skills at school entry that can be entered into the state longitudinal data system. This hybrid approach to assessment may improve the likelihood that a single assessment tool can meet multiple purposes.

The states that are using an existing preschool tool (e.g., California, Delaware, and Washington) for the basis of their KEA may also provide important advances to the field of assessment. The expansion of B-5 formative assessments into kindergarten may push the field to continue progress toward the development of single assessments that would span ages birth to eight. Having more assessments that are appropriate for children from birth through third grade may make it easier to prepare and provide professional development that is aligned across the B-5 and elementary school systems.

ELC states are also taking steps to strengthen the technical properties of assessments (i.e. reliability and validity) and, as a result, the credibility of the data collected with the KEAs. Washington and Delaware, for example, have conducted studies to gather reliability data about their KEAs. California has also conducted several research studies that have provided reliability and validity evidence...
for its instrument. Ohio and Delaware require kindergarten teachers to meet a particular reliability training standard before they are able to access the assessment. Kindergarten teachers must demonstrate their understanding of the assessment tool before they use the tool to gather information about children. With the ELC requirement that the KEA data be entered into the state longitudinal data system, careful attention to the quality of the data (e.g., reliability and validity, quality control for data entry) is essential if the data are going to be useful in understanding children’s educational trajectories and answering important policy questions.

While only a few examples are highlighted here, the work of all of the ELC states will produce better assessment tools and supports that can benefit non-ELC states that are interested in implementing a KEA—and go a long way toward advancing the field of kindergarten entry assessment.

Finding 9: States are taking one step at a time in establishing professional development for the KEA.

Professional development is part of every ELC state’s KEA implementation. State leaders described a phased approach to professional development in terms of both the content as well as the recipient. In general, their goals for content include moving from understanding how to administer the tool to using the information to inform classroom practice and quality improvement. For professional development recipients, states are moving beyond a focus on the teachers who implement the KEA to others in the system, such as principals.

States described initially focusing the professional development content on the assessment, targeting teachers (the end users) as the recipients. This initial professional development was intended to support teachers in understanding what the KEA is and how to appropriately administer the KEA. In our interviews with some ELC state leaders, we often heard them talk about working to expand both the content and audience for their KEA professional development. In terms of content, they talked about expanding beyond the basic focus on how to administer the KEA to broader topics of formative assessment, observations of children’s skills, and the relationship between formative assessment and instruction. Leaders also acknowledged the importance of helping teachers use the information obtained from the assessment to adapt their instruction. Using the assessment information to guide instruction is critical in meeting one of the intended goals for the KEA as specified in the ELC application. Supporting teachers in using the KEA data, though, seems like a step for the future after the more immediate needs are met (e.g., developing a tool, training teachers on the new tool).
Finally, state leaders also talked about the importance of professional development for administrators so that they could understand the KEA and support teachers in doing and using it appropriately. Ohio, for example, offered weekly web conference calls for district administrators to answer questions during the KEA implementation and is planning to develop a special training just for administrators. Colorado has developed training specifically for principals and is planning a leadership academy to address assessment and other pre-k to third grade issues. Delaware invited principals to professional development sessions and held conference calls to support their understanding of the KEA.

The professional development needs for kindergarten teachers in using a KEA are enormous, and states are being thoughtful about using their ELC funds to support the development of professional development that can be sustained beyond the life of the grant. Ohio, for example, developed an online training system for its kindergarten teachers and offered districts the option of face-to-face, online, or a hybrid approach to training. California is developing a cadre of train-the-trainers across the state who will be able to provide the necessary professional development now and after the ELC grant has ended.

**Finding 10: The use of assessment in the K-12 system is impacting the KEA.**

It is important to understand how the use of assessment in the K-12 system has impacted ELC states’ efforts to implement a KEA. The ELC requirement to implement a formative assessment at the beginning of kindergarten fits within a long history of assessments in the K-12 system. Many of the K-12 assessments are high-stakes, federally- or state-mandated, designed to be administered outside of instruction, and used to inform broader state, district, or school policies as well as to inform instruction. More broadly, this country is having a national debate about the role of assessment in public education—wondering whether we assess too much. Sometimes the debate pits assessment against instruction, possibly because some of the assessments used in schools serve other purposes besides guiding instruction. This larger context makes it challenging for ELC states to develop and implement yet another assessment—especially one that has a different purpose than many other assessments in the K-12 system.

Even when kindergarten teachers understand the usefulness of the formative assessment and embrace the broader focus on the five developmental domains, they may find it challenging to implement it in the current educational system. ELC states are considering these issues as they develop and implement their KEAs. North Carolina, for instance, has intentionally positioned the KEA as the first administration of its K-3 assessment and elected to focus on a small number of constructs to make it more manageable for kindergarten teachers. Washington and Delaware also reduced the size of their KEAs, while maintaining items to assess all five developmental domains, in response to kindergarten teachers’ concerns about the feasibility of conducting the assessment. With so many assessments and pressures in the K-12 system, keeping the KEA short is one strategy to try to integrate this new assessment into the existing educational system.

Besides the larger debate about assessment in schools, there is another important contextual piece of the K-12 system that is affecting the ELC KEA efforts. Elementary teachers typically have not received much training (pre-service or in-service) on formative assessments. Teachers need support in understanding how these new KEAs should go hand-in-hand with instruction, rather than taking time away from instruction. North Carolina has developed a video to demonstrate how the assessment can be integrated into the regular classroom routine, and Washington leaders mentioned the advantage of having kindergarten teachers hear from early childhood teachers about how they have integrated assessment into their practice. The gap is large between the vision that state ELC leaders have for the use of the KEA and the reality of what is currently possible in elementary schools—and it will take multiple efforts from key organizations and leaders to bridge the gap in the coming years.
Finding 11: States are working to sustain KEA implementation.

ELC states have had to think about the sustainability of their KEAs even as they were developing them. In our interviews, seven of the eight states reported that the ELC grant funds the majority of their current KEA work. In North Carolina, ELC funds represent about half of the resources devoted to the K-3 assessment; the other half come from state allocations. In California, much of the KEA was developed before the ELC but it is using the ELC funds to add another domain to the assessment. In all eight states, however, full implementation of the KEA will require funds long beyond the life of the ELC grant so it is critical to address sustainability.

State leaders discussed strategic decisions made to support sustainability. States such as North Carolina and Ohio have relied on their current K-12 infrastructure, in part, to support the roll-out of the KEA—strengthening their existing system rather than creating a new one. North Carolina is using its regional technical assistance system, Ohio is using district-level staff to support the ongoing training of kindergarten teachers, and Delaware is providing stipends to kindergarten teachers to support implementation of the KEA. Even with this approach, though, states have needed to expand the existing infrastructure and hire extra staff to help train and implement the KEAs (North Carolina, Ohio, and Washington). Developing train-the-trainer and online professional development tools have also been strategic choices for states, investing the ELC funds in one-time expenses that they hope will strengthen the capacity of their states to implement the KEAs even after the grant ends.

Legislation was viewed as key to the likely allocation of funds to support the KEA beyond the life of the grant. Of the eight states included in this analysis, five had legislation requiring a KEA (Colorado, Delaware, North Carolina, Ohio, and Washington). Colorado also built a KEA into the state education department’s strategic plan, as a strategy to help keep the attention on the KEA. Colorado also developed a graduated payment structure so that the ELC grant funds less of the KEA each year of the grant (with districts assuming higher costs each year).

Recommendations

We offer three recommendations to consider as states continue their work to develop and implement standards and assessment.

1. Make provisions for long-term efforts to support the use of standards and assessments. Although ELC states have made great strides, they need to continue working at multiple levels of the system to ensure that standards and assessments are used appropriately to guide instruction.

2. Strive for continuity with an eye toward differences in providing professional development when promoting a birth through third grade approach. State leaders should continue their efforts to coordinate professional development and implement similar assessments in early childhood and elementary school, but they must also recognize the inherent differences in the two systems (e.g., different infrastructure for professional development, different levels of teacher education) and develop strategies that are coordinated across the two systems while also fitting into each system.

3. Be the champions and guardians of quality KEA data. State leaders must ensure that the KEA data are reliable and valid before they are entered in the State Longitudinal Data System.

Whereas the previous sections of this chapter are based directly on the interviews, the ideas in this section represent our thoughts and reflections based on what we heard in the interviews and from other work on standards and assessment we have done with states. We hope that these ideas will help states continue their important work to support young children’s development and learning.
Recommendation 1: In for the marathon, not just the sprint: make provisions for long-term efforts to support the use of standards and assessments.

The ELC certainly feels like a sprint to many, most days. And there is considerable work to be accomplished on standards and assessment during the grant period. Yet it is nothing short of a marathon to instill ELDS as the heart of teaching practice and have early childhood and elementary teachers appropriately use formative assessments, aligned with those standards, to guide their teaching practice.

We hope state leaders will use this time during the ELC grant period to develop long-term plans to address the development and refinement of standards and assessment tools, the professional development for teachers to understand the standards and assessments, the professional development for administrators and others who support teachers, and the professional development—both pre-service and in-service—needed to ensure that teachers appropriately use the information to inform instruction. The ultimate goal of having standards and formative assessments is to strengthen instruction to support children’s optimal development in the five school readiness domains.

Thus, this work is just as much (or more) about instructional practice than the standards or assessments themselves. Both early childhood and elementary teachers will need an expanded skill set that includes a solid understanding of how to observe children and extract from those observations a sense of what they do and do not know, an ability to map the observed behaviors onto the standards, and understanding of how to document through an assessment tool the broader or underlying constructs represented by the particular behavior.\(^5\)

Shifting practice to ensure teachers have these requisite skills will require major changes in higher education (both community colleges and universities) as well as in-service professional development. Several states have begun to address the need to strengthen pre-service teacher preparation programs so they can better prepare students to effectively use ELDS and assessments. Institutional requirements/processes for making curriculum changes and (at times) faculty who are less “in touch” with the field’s increasing emphasis on the use of ELDS and the specific assessments being used may slow higher education programs’ abilities to meet the need for teachers who are well prepared for the intentional use of standards and assessments. It is, however, critical that pre-service teacher preparation programs are part of the comprehensive effort to shift practice because they are key to a “pipeline” of effective teachers. In addition, much additional work is

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needed to strengthen in-service professional development to support teachers using ELDS and assessments. In-service professional development will need to target a broader audience, continue to broaden the content of the professional development, and shift one-shot trainings to sustained professional development experiences, using models that have been proven to effectively change teachers’ practices. What’s more, the professional development efforts will have to be sustained over a long period of time to ensure that as teachers leave their positions, new teachers are well-prepared to assume the responsibilities for using ELDS and assessments to effectively work with children. The effort to strengthen professional development at the pre-service and in-service levels will require significant time and resources.

Though ELC states are focused now on the first leg of the marathon—creating or revising assessments that are aligned with standards and supporting teachers’ understanding of the tools—the journey is just beginning and will require many more years to ensure that early learning and development standards and assessments improve the quality of instruction to the level that will positively change children’s trajectories.

**Recommendation 2: Strive for continuity with an eye toward differences in providing professional development when promoting a birth through third grade approach.**

The increasing focus on the use of assessments to guide instruction prior to and at the time children enter kindergarten offers opportunities to strengthen the push for a birth to third grade approach. The use of formative assessments can, theoretically, result in teachers at all age/grade levels focusing more attention on individualized instruction, and when the assessments used in different systems are the same tool (or aligned tools), teachers should be focusing their attention on similar aspects of children’s learning and development across the age/grade span. The use of formative assessment can, therefore, provide a foundation for continuity in children’s experiences as they move from early childhood settings into kindergarten. However, as states plan for a more aligned birth to third grade approach, there is a need to develop and implement professional development that both promotes consistency and collaboration between the two systems and, at the same time, addresses the unique professional development needs of teachers working in B-5 systems and in K-12 systems.

There are a number of factors that contribute to unique professional development needs for teachers working in B-5 vs. K-12 systems. For instance, teachers working in early care and education settings have different professional development experiences than teachers working in kindergarten, with a higher percentage of degreed/licensed teachers in the kindergarten settings. Regarding in-service professional development, teachers in kindergarten settings often are required to have formal professional development plans, but they may not have access to in-service professional development that specifically targets observation-based planning or formative assessment for kindergarten-age children. Teachers working in early care and education settings may have more background in observation-based assessments than kindergarten teachers. Furthermore, the work responsibilities and settings differ. Early care and education teachers often work with smaller groups and for longer instructional days than kindergarten teachers, perhaps allowing more time for individualized observations/assessments. In general, kindergarten classrooms may physically be less conducive to the types of observational assessments that many states are promoting, with fewer materials to promote open-ended observations. Additionally, the extent to which the instructional approach/curriculum lends itself to the use of information from formative assessments may differ between preschool and kindergarten programs. Therefore, while ideally states should promote an aligned and consistent approach to assessment between early care and education and kindergarten, the fact is that the teachers’ professional development, work place supports for conducting this type of assessment, and conditions for using formative assessment may differ.

The differences between early care and education and kindergarten teachers are, however, just part of the picture. Differences in the professional development systems...
that support teachers in early care and education and in kindergarten are also quite stark. Within institutions of higher education, pre-service teacher education programs for early care and education teachers are often housed in separate units from pre-service programs for kindergarten teachers. Similarly, in-service professional development systems differ significantly. Early care and education teachers often receive professional development through Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) systems, departments that oversee child care funding and regulations, and local quality improvement entities. Public school teachers may rely more heavily on entities affiliated with the state’s department of education, such as regional service centers and public school districts. Although pre-kindergarten teachers may receive professional development through department of education resources, the basic professional development systems for early care and education teachers and kindergarten teachers tend to be stored, even as we whole-heartedly support the birth through third grade movement as a strategy to enhance continuity for children, we caution that states need to seek to promote continuity and, at the same time, address differences that exist between the early care and education system and the K-12 system. Cross-system planning and coordination should be central to any effort to promote continuity in the assessments being used in early care and education and kindergarten. Ideally, the same instrument or closely aligned instruments and assessment processes would be used in early care and education and kindergarten settings, and there would be some opportunities for joint professional development to promote communication and information sharing across the age/grade levels. Furthermore, instructional approaches and curricula used in both early childhood settings and in kindergarten settings should support the use of formative assessment in order to individualize instruction.

This does not, however, negate the need for targeted professional development provided separately for early care and education and kindergarten teachers to address their own unique professional development needs and work settings. States should seek to promote continuity and, at the same time, keep an eye on the unique professional development and systems—building efforts needed to promote the use of instructional assessments and continuity in both systems.

Recommendation 3: Be champions and guardians of quality KEA data: assure that KEA data are reliable and valid.

The intent of the ELC is that at least part of the KEA data will be entered into the K-12 State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), which will allow states to link information about children as they enter school to their later school performance. The usefulness of the KEA is only as good as the quality of the data. Teachers’ ratings or assessments of children must be reliable, which will require a large and ongoing investment in professional development.

State leaders overseeing the KEA play the important guardian roles of ensuring that a) the system supports teachers in completing the KEA so that it produces valid, reliable data, b) there are ongoing procedures to determine the reliability and validity of the data that are entered into the KEA, and c) data are not entered into the SLDS until there is evidence of its reliability and validity. Once KEAs are implemented statewide, there may be pressure to include the data in the SLDS immediately. We hope that ELC leaders will continue to champion the appropriate use of assessment data and guard against using the data before its validity and reliability have been demonstrated.

The following strategies might be helpful in supporting high-quality KEA data:

1. Develop a plan for KEA data collection, analysis, and use/dissemination. A written plan will clarify the intended uses of the information, plans for how the data will be reliably collected, and plans for the major types of questions that will be answered with the KEA data. This plan can be an important tool to communicate the appropriate use of the data, as well as how the data should not be used. It would be useful to include teachers, administrators, families, assessment experts, and state leaders in the development of a plan.

2. Implement the KEA for at least three years before considering the possibility of including the data in the SLDS. Implementation science suggests that it takes at least two to four years to implement a new program.6 We expect the KEA would take at least that long to be implemented well and at-scale. Understanding and using the KEA appropriately does not happen overnight. Even when the KEA is implemented

statewide, the first years of implementation will likely be challenging and full of lessons learned. Give the system time to overcome some of the early implementation challenges before considering using the data. It is important to have evidence of the KEA’s reliability and validity before entering it into the SLDS.

3. Establish guidelines for the evidence of reliability and validity needed prior to entering the data into the SLDS. What evidence is “good enough” to have confidence in the data, and how will the state determine that the KEA data has met established guidelines for reliability and validity?

4. Identify funds to support ongoing professional development on the appropriate use of the KEA tool and for periodic data on the reliability and validity of the assessment. Teachers change, and we all forget things we’ve been taught. Thus, professional development must be continuous to ensure that the KEA is administered as intended. Reliability and validity are not inherent in the assessment tool but, instead, vary from use to use and year to year. Funds and procedures need to be in place to periodically determine whether the KEA data is reliable and valid for its intended purpose.

5. Establish and implement quality control procedures to evaluate the accuracy of the data at all levels, from the point that a teacher records or enters data through the data analysis and report writing.

6. Conduct periodic reviews on how the KEA data entered into the SLDS is being used by various stakeholders—and use the information to guide revisions to the KEA data collection, data entry, and communication processes.

**Conclusion**

States have capitalized on the ELC to expand and accelerate their work to promote the use of standards and assessments. The ELC has promoted broader efforts to plan and implement professional development, to introduce new requirements for programs to use standards and assessments, and to develop numerous resources that will exist long beyond the grant. As such, the ELC has been a catalyst to improve states’ efforts to build the infrastructure that is necessary to promote high quality early education programs and, in turn, high quality learning experiences for children over many generations to come.

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BUILD Initiative Credits

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Forward Ever for All Young Children!