

The Early Learning Challenge Collaborative

In May, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced a new \$500 million state-level grant competition, the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge that seeks “to encourage states to develop bold and comprehensive plans for raising the quality of early learning programs across America.”

The early childhood field is energized by the administration’s commitment, even in tough economic times, to invest in building comprehensive early learning systems that will help to close the achievement gap. As a parallel to Race to the Top for K-12, the Early Learning Challenge demonstrates federal recognition of the reality that children are born learning and that nurturing their early development and the ability of their families to support them matters enormously for educational and life outcomes.

The Early Learning Challenge presents a pivotal opportunity for states that want to advance high-quality and comprehensive early childhood systems and services. The Early Learning Challenge also presents the early learning field with a unique opportunity to be intentional and strategic about how best to leverage this federal investment into practices and policies that can help close the achievement gap for all children. It also enables states to continue the work of the public-private partnerships that over the past decade have been critical to the development of the early learning system building movement that laid the groundwork and created the frame for the Early Learning Challenge. Even as the Early Learning Challenge fuels this movement, foundations, and nonprofit organizations, especially those with knowledge of state early childhood policies, have a unique opportunity to ensure that the systems-building movement demonstrates the kind of results that will enable it to take root and create a fundamental shift in the way this nation invests in young children.

BUILD, the leading early childhood systems building organization, and the First Five Years Fund, whose federal advocacy and education frame has strengthened the connection between early childhood and the K-12 community, propose to seize this opportunity and form The Early Learning Challenge Collaborative (ELCC), a partnership supported by private foundation dollars, to work with and support states as they plan, apply for, and implement the Early Learning Challenge Grants. The Early Learning Challenge Collaborative will also seek to promote state systems-building by shaping and informing state and federal policy on early childhood systems, expanding the number of states that build effective early childhood systems, and working to sustain the Early Learning Challenge and federal investments for young children and state systems that support them.

Specifically, the ELCC will:

1. Cultivate a pool of outstanding state applications.
2. Support states with sophisticated, relevant and individualized technical assistance, consultation services and information, with a further emphasis on creating a learning community among participating states.



3. Promote quality and the development of a robust cross-sector early childhood system connected to education outcomes in all states.
4. Develop a coordinated federal policy and advocacy strategy to sustain funding and inform federal policy in this area, both short and long-term.

BUILD and the First Five Years Fund will collaborate with other organizations and experts to achieve the goals of this initiative. Because the Birth to Five Policy Alliance is already making strong, targeted investments in the field, in Phase 3, it will be a key collaborator and part of the core advisors group. The Collaborative will coordinate with the Birth to Five Policy Alliance and its key national grantees to maximize technical assistance and learning community resources available to all states. It will also leverage other K-12 and early learning experts for relevant content and process expertise.

This Collaborative has several benefits and assets:

- It combines the strength and experience of funders and non-profits;
- It draws on a strong history of work on comprehensive systems building;
- It combines a focus on systems building with a coordinated focus on policy development and advocacy; and
- Collectively, the partners bring strong internal resources and significant external relationships to those with early learning and K-12 content knowledge and with strong federal advocacy experience.

The ELCC's work will be in three phases. The current first phase will continue until mid-August and will focus on cultivating interest among key stakeholders and states for applying for the Early Learning Challenge Grant as well as shaping the competition design and key criteria. The ELCC second phase will be from mid-August until mid-October and will focus on ensuring strong applications from states and providing differentiated support to states to boost the strength of their applications. The third and final phase of the Collaborative will begin in 2012 as we use a range of strategies appropriate to the varying situations across the 50 states. States that have won federal grants will be supported in implementing plans effectively. Other promising states will be supported to advance their work. And all states will be provided with resources, information and lessons learned along the way. The Collaborative will have an intentional strategy to sustain the Early Learning Challenge. We believe in this way we can sustain the long-term impact of early childhood systems building as an effective means to ensuring children enter school ready to learn. We believe the need for this work will continue beyond 2012; the Collaborative will monitor both the economic and political climate to make that assessment.

The Early Learning Challenge Collaborative welcomes the opportunity to build upon the commitment, the knowledge and skills gained from the past decade of birth to five and early childhood systems building work to help state leaders take advantage of the historic federal investment represented by the Early Learning Challenge. We recognize that the Administration's act of issuing the Challenge is a tribute to years of work of funders, advocates, practitioners, and experts and makes a bold statement that early learning is a critical part of the nation's education system. The ELCC is eager to meet the challenge of leveraging this funding opportunity to expand the capacity of states to help all children from birth to five in a comprehensive, coordinated system and to help close the achievement gap.

