



Early Learning Matters

Summer 2015

NJ DEPARTMENTS OF

EDUCATION

CHILDREN & FAMILIES

HEALTH

HUMAN SERVICES

A newsletter highlighting New Jersey's Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, a series of coordinated programs focusing on improving statewide access to high-quality early learning and development programs for thousands of high-needs children, birth to age eight.

Welcome



Vincent J. Costanza, Ed.D.

Welcome to the first issue of Early Learning Matters, a newsletter that will chronicle the work underway in our state to improve the quality of education and child care for New Jersey's children, from birth to third grade. Using a \$44.3 million dollar grant provided by the federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, as well as state funds, New Jersey is taking a variety of approaches across many disciplines to improve early learning and to support the families of our youngest learners. Coordinating the work of four state agencies, the departments of Children and Families, Education, Health and Human Services, as well as other allied agencies and groups, we are working to ensure that there are meaningful standards for — and links between — many of the most important services available for young children. All our activities are aimed at one broad goal: improving early childhood health, readiness and the ability to learn.

New Jersey also has begun to educate parents about how to make informed choices for their children and choices that will help their children benefit from the best possible early childhood education or child care. Through this newsletter and through other public communications, we will also be reaching out to the larger community of educators and the public.

This issue describes very briefly some of the major programs that make up New Jersey's Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge. In each issue, we will focus in greater depth on one of these programs and update you on the various components of the grant. We hope you will enjoy learning about the many ways our state is using these grant funds to strengthen early learning for our children.

Research and experience confirm the premise of our program: early learning does matter. What an exciting time for educators and caregivers of New Jersey's youngest children! What could be more exciting than giving New Jersey's youngest citizens a great start on the journey toward successful lives?

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Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge

The goal of New Jersey's Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge is to improve and better coordinate programs and services to help infants and young children make the most of their potential to develop and learn. As is fitting for such a complex undertaking, New Jersey is approaching this objective through a number of related initiatives. The following is a list of Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge projects that are currently underway. We will be profiling the progress of a number of these in upcoming issues of Early Learning Matters.

Preschool to Third Grade Initiative

This project will focus on providing support to teachers in preschool to third grade. The initiative has produced draft guidelines for grades one to three that outline teaching practices that are both age-appropriate and academically rigorous. This effort will complete the New Jersey Department of Education Early Childhood Guidelines series, which will now include: New Jersey Preschool Implementation Guidelines, New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines and New Jersey First through Third Grade Implementation

Selected Resources on the Web:

The Race to the Top program:
nj.gov/education/ece/rttt/facts.htm

The NJ Kindergarten Entry Assessment (NJKEA):
state.nj.us/education/ece/rttt/njkea/

Grow NJ Kids:
GrowNJKids.com



State of New Jersey

Governor
Chris Christie

Lt. Governor
Kim Guadagno

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Guidelines. This series and the coordination it reflects will position New Jersey as a national leader in Pre-K to Third Grade practices. Next, the initiative will focus on (1) field testing the grade one to three guidelines; (2) training teachers and administrators in applying the guidelines in diverse settings throughout the state; and, (3) developing a series of videos to help educators observe the guidelines in action.

Kindergarten Entry Assessment

This voluntary state-funded program is designed to get a clear view of children's starting points in kindergarten across a range of learning objectives and child development and readiness. In the program's first year, districts are focusing on three areas: the kindergarteners' (1) social-emotional, (2) literacy and (3) math readiness. Focus on these areas is designed to help shape instruction at the point at which children enter kindergarten, as well as throughout the entire year. During its first year, 200 teachers and 94 administrators in 29 school districts participated in the program. Additional districts across the state are currently volunteering to participate in summer workshops to prepare for their implementation in the 2015-2016 school year.

Aligning State Standards from Birth to Age Eight

This initiative is designed to make sure that the state's standards from birth to grade three are uniform and that staff throughout the state is trained in these uniform standards; additionally, these standards will include benchmarks for how to involve family members in the education of their children from birth to grade three.

Grow NJ Kids

In its second year, Grow NJ Kids, a centerpiece of the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, is continuing to develop a rating and improvement system designed to measure strengths and help address weaknesses in child care and early learning programs. It also continues to provide training and incentives to improve these programs, and to communicate their level of quality to parents and the public. Grow NJ Kids is designed to create a universal standard of quality for all early care and education programs, whether they be Head Start programs, private family-based child care, for-profit and non-profit child care centers, preschools, or programs in public schools.

The New Jersey Early Learning Training Academy

Closely related to Grow NJ Kids, the Training Academy is designed to create a group of certified trainers who are experts in teaching the uniform and quality standards that will be used to create high-quality early learning and child care programs. Additionally, the Training Academy will offer instruction to early learning and child care program staff members, instruction that will be provided affordably or as an incentive under the Grow NJ Kids program. In fall 2014, the state Department of Education created a partnership with Rutgers University's Center for Effective School Practices (CEST) to coordinate the Training Academy's activities. Rutgers' CEST has, in turn, joined forces with Passaic County Community College and Atlantic-Cape Community College to provide coverage for all parts of the state. Ultimately, the Early Learning Training Academy will offer regional instruction in the North, Central and South portions of the state, making it easier for early education teachers and child caregivers to attend and upgrade their skills.

Central Intake Hubs and County Councils for Young Children

In its efforts to support families, the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge funding will establish Central Intake Hubs in an additional six counties, augmenting the 15 already in place — making them available in all of the state's 21 counties. These intake hubs provide one-stop-shopping for health- and education-based family services and will provide family screening, assessment, referral and tracking services. In a related initiative, grant funds also will establish County Councils for Young Children (CCYC) in all 21 counties to serve as forums for family feedback on each initiative.

In the next issue of Early Learning Matters

Spotlight on

