

## **An Update on the Vermont Early Learning Challenge – Race to the Top Grant February 2015**

Vermont's Early Learning Challenge – Race to the Top grant (ELC) is a \$36.9 million, federally funded, four-year grant awarded in January 2014. The grant helps build a high-quality and accessible early childhood system in the state so that all young children will be ready to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

The Early Learning Challenge grant includes projects and strategies to:

- Improve quality and access of early learning and development opportunities
- Invest in a highly skilled workforce through professional development
- Empower communities to support young children and families
- Ensure we are making a difference by strengthening data systems, collection, and analysis

**In the past year, the grant implementation team and its partners throughout the state has made significant progress toward these goals. Achievements include:**

- **Strengthening STARS:** STep Ahead Recognition System (STARS) is Vermont's quality recognition system for child care, preschool, and afterschool programs. Programs that participate in STARS go above and beyond state regulations to provide high-quality, professional services to meet the needs of children and families. As part of our ELC progress this year:
  - Child Trends research center will be launching an independent, comprehensive evaluation of STARS to ensure that our system for rating high quality programs is effective and that Vermont children are truly accessing the best opportunities.
  - New STARS bonuses build upon the practice of awarding one time incentive payments to programs who achieve a higher star level, by providing 80% of the award amount annually to programs that maintain their STARS level.
  - Thanks to a partnership with the non-profit Vermont Birth to 3 (VB3), the percent of registered family child care homes participating in STARS is now 75%.
- **Improving Child Wellness:**
  - The Vermont Department of Health is partnering with the United Ways of Vermont to develop the 2-1-1 phone line as a "go-to" place for information, support, community resources, and referrals in the world of early childhood. This effort is part of Vermont's implementation of the *Help Me Grow* model. The 2-1-1 phone line will be staffed by trained early childhood care coordinators who:
    - (1) answer parent and caregivers questions about their children's development
    - (2) provide families with tools to track developmental milestones
    - (3) connect families to the necessary resources in their communities, including Children's Integrated Services.
  - We reinvigorated the Child Care Wellness Consultant program, which provides trained nurses to assist early learning and development programs in developing policies and environments that promote children's health and development with special attention to nutritional and physical activity standards.
- **Increasing Professional Learning Opportunities:**
  - An ELC funded grant to the Vermont Child Care Industry and Career Council, Inc. provides three additional cycles of six college courses as part of Vermont's successful Child Care Apprenticeship Program. VCCICC has worked with CCV to provide

- a new five week writers' workshop to prepare current child care providers for college level coursework.
- Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VAEYC) is implementing Teacher Education and Compensation Help (T.E.A.C.H. ) which provides scholarships to enable early educators to take coursework leading to credentials and degrees. More than 30 individuals from throughout the state have received T.E.A.C.H. scholarships so far. The average GPA for the 26 TEACH scholarship recipients completing the fall 2014 semester was 3.78!
  - **Developing Early Childhood Leadership Institute:** ELC awarded a grant to the Snelling Center to launch an Early Childhood Leadership Institute (ECLI), modeled after the successful Vermont Leadership Institute. ECLI seeks to stimulate enthusiasm for and effective participation in efforts to improve early childhood work in Vermont. Recruitment for the first cohort is taking place currently.
  - **Revising the Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS) and Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS):** Given that the goal of the Early Learning Challenge grant is to make sure all Vermont children are ready to succeed in Kindergarten, it is important to have an accurate measure of kindergarten readiness.
    - In 2013-2014, the American Institute for Research (AIR) completed a validation and reliability study of Vermont's Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS). With significant input from the field, a cross-agency team drafted a revised version of the KRS. They gave particular attention to ensuring KRS items are appropriate for diverse populations of children, including dual language learners and children with disabilities.
    - In fall 2014, approximately 100 kindergarten teachers piloted this enhanced version of the KRS along with the earlier KRS. AIR is in the process of analyzing the results of the Pilot KRS to determine the validity and reliability of the tool, and to compare responses to the data from the KRS typically administered. The results from the study of the Pilot KRS should be available in March 2015.
    - Vermont is also engaged in a process to re-conceptualize and revise Vermont's Early Learning Standards (VELS). A key element of this revision is making sure the VELS reflects the full continuum of early childhood, from infancy through third grade in order to support continuity of learning and development across children's first eight years.
  - **Launching VT Insights:** In November 2014, Building Bright Futures launched Vermont Insights, a web platform for the collection and integration of early childhood data systems. Vermont Insights will acquire, connect and analyze data across the early childhood system to inform essential policy questions. It will help Vermonters leverage meaningful data to guide policies that improve the well-being of children, families and communities.

These are just a few of the milestones achieved in the first year of the Early Learning Challenge grant. All of these efforts work together to create a system that supports the success of all Vermont children in the early years.

More information can be found at <http://buildingbrightfutures.org/early-learning-challenge/>.

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