

The Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) was awarded \$4.48 million through the federal Preschool Development Grant B-5 (PDG) for activities to strengthen NC's early childhood education (ECE) system. The PDG will fund activities for assessing statewide needs and strategic planning for the state's early learning system, supporting family outreach and engagement efforts, building on best practices for improved services for families, and impacting quality ECE through increased resources and support for infant-toddler caregivers.

Statewide Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan for North Carolina's Early Education System

- Both activities focus specifically on ECE programs and will build upon the existing work that has been done for NC's Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP), as well work done through Pathways to Third Grade Reading, the NC Institute of Medicine, the Pritzker Foundation, etc.
- These efforts will help identify gaps in services or barriers to providing high quality ECE services as well as families' perceptions of available resources. They will also address efforts to improve children's transition from preschool to public school and strategize for the best way to track children's outcomes at kindergarten entry.
- Collaboration and coordination of services across the ECE system will be examined, with a focus on how best to meet the needs of young children, particularly our most vulnerable children, and their families.

Maximizing Parent Knowledge, Engagement and Choice

The PDG provides opportunity for NC to strengthen family engagement through a variety of strategies. This includes ensuring that parents are provided information about ECE services for children and promoting/increasing parent and family involvement in the development and education of their children. A Leadership Team will be formed to develop a statewide family engagement framework to apply across ECE programs..

- Smart Start's extensive expertise and infrastructure will be leveraged to deliver and foster family engagement activities and technical assistance in local communities. Local community planning initiatives will promote family engagement across systems through training, technical assistance and coaching.
- Partnering with the community planning initiatives overseen by Smart Start, UNC-TV Public Media NC will assist in hosting events aimed at deepening engagement with families across the state, with free hands-on learning activities, demonstrations supported by community partners, as well as PBS KIDS education resources.
- Greater outreach to families is planned through expanding NCCARE360, a new statewide tool that will make it easier for communities to connect people with the resources they need. NCCARE360 will connect ECE providers and partners to each other

as well as to the network of resources available, to support ECE programs in linking families to services that they may need.

- Funds will also be used to evaluate materials for translating to languages other than English to acknowledge the diversity of families in the state, and to implement alternate methods of connecting with families other than face-to-face or over the phone.

Sharing Best Practice at the Local Level and Improving Transitions

Sharing best practices among ECE programs will increase collaboration and efficiency of services, including supporting children's successful transition from preschool to kindergarten.

- Recognizing that a universal enrollment/application process for services for four-year-old children is a best practice for coordinating effective service delivery across ECE programs, DCDEE invited three contractors who have successfully implemented this approach to mentor other contractors who wish to start a similar process.
- Building on successful kindergarten transition activities at the local level will help ensure that families who need services during the transition period can access them. Areas of focus for this project with the Department of Public Instruction include supporting communication between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers; giving families a way to provide information about their child to the kindergarten teacher; training for teachers to use the transition data they receive; and a way to transfer data from Pre-K to kindergarten.
- Funds will be used to enhance data sharing across ECE programs and to integrate with NC's Early Childhood Data System (ECIDS), in order to address data gaps so that ECE outcomes may be measured better. A survey of ECE data users will help identify areas that may be integrated into ECIDS and will provide information on ECAP measures.

Improving Overall Quality

The PDG requires one activity to improve the quality of ECE programs, after the Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan are completed. Since extensive research on early brain development has shown that investments in the first three years of a child's life are critical, NC will focus on increasing access to high quality, center-based early learning programs for families of infants/toddlers by expanding the NC Babies First (NCB1) program successfully piloted in the RTT-ELC grant and modeled after NC Pre-K. Intensive supports for teachers and directors will allow developmental screenings and formative assessments to be completed and improvement plans based to be created. Programs may receive stepped funding incentives based on goal attainment which can be reinvested to continue quality improvements. This project will target center-based, 5-star ECE settings in areas of the state with the greatest need for high quality infant and toddler care not currently served by Early Head Start. Five-star programs have shown their commitment to quality through their achievement of this highest QRIS level and are best primed to take the next step to meeting higher standards.