



Fact Sheet: Oklahoma's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Grant

The purpose of early childhood education is to ensure that children, especially those children with high needs, enter kindergarten with the cognitive and social skills they need to succeed. Currently, more than 7 in 10 Oklahoma four year-olds participate in some form of early childhood learning program. The goal of the RTT-ELC grant application is to outline a series of actions that could be taken to improve the quality of the state's early learning programs with additional funding assistance.

The grant application focuses on building and improving currently existing early childhood education programs by establishing best practices, improving performance measurement systems as well as teacher training, and upgrading data collection systems that measure program effectiveness as well as help to identify students with special needs. Participation in all early learning services will continue to be voluntary.

The RTT-ELC grant was drafted with the help and input of the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (ODHS), the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) and Oklahoma Department of Commerce (ODC). All of the above agencies will be partners in implementing the RTT-ELC grant, with the OSDE serving as the lead agency.

Key Components of the Grant Application

- **Establish a New Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)**

The state currently has a QRIS for child care programs called "Reaching for the Stars," which gives programs ratings from one to three stars based on performance and quality measures. The application proposes a new, improved QRIS that will be based on higher standards and adherence to best practices that support kindergarten readiness. The new QRIS will include identifying benchmarks or targets for early learning centers to achieve certain levels of competence in order to obtain a higher rating. The system will build upon existing infrastructure to provide a uniform standard for programs offered by different providers and agencies. The best practices will be determined by experts in early childhood education, providers and parents among other stakeholders.

- **Better Coordinate Existing Services**

Oklahoma has dozens of initiatives which support kindergarten readiness. Their impact can be maximized by better coordinating and integrating services. The RTT-ELC application outlines a path for partnership agencies to collaborate and develop a more cohesive system to ensure high needs children are linked to appropriate services. The end-result will be a system that is much easier for parents and families to navigate. For example, after implementing proposals contained in the RTT-ELC grant, a child care provider would have better access to information about nearby services and programs that are available in order to care for a child with special needs.

- **Improve Professional Development**

In early learning and development settings, nothing matters more to children's success than the adults caring for and teaching them. The RTT-ELC application proposes the creation of more effective training programs based on best practices as outlined by the QRIS. The accountability system will be aligned with workforce competencies and teacher credentials. An innovative Early Learning Consortium will be created to provide professional development and ensure that training programs are targeted, high-quality and comprehensive.

- **Comprehensive Early Learning Data System**

The RTT-ELC application proposes the development of a unified early learning data system that will enable us to effectively measure student outcomes. The data system will be a great resource for parents and providers to act on the needs of children once those needs are identified. The new data system will enhance the WAVE and P-20 data systems already being developed by the state.

- **Establishment of a Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA)**

The RTT-ELC application proposes that every student attending a state funded pre-K program take an entry assessment at the beginning of kindergarten. The purpose of the KEA is to inform the state's efforts to close the school readiness gap at kindergarten entry and inform instruction and services in the early elementary grades. The KEA will be aligned with the State's Early Learning and Development Standards and will cover all essential domains of school readiness.

Licensing and Participation in the QRIS:

The Department of Human Services already licenses most early learning and childcare centers. The RTT-ELC grant application does not propose any changes to rules governing which centers must receive a license. A center that does not currently require a license will not require a new license under RTT-ELC proposals.

All current exemptions for state licensing are preserved under the RTT-ELC grant application. Those exemptions include:

- Programs operating fifteen hours or less a week
- Facilities on tribal land
- Facilities on federal property
- Child care provided in a child's own home or by relatives
- Informal arrangements parents make with friends or neighbors for occasional care

All remaining programs that operate in a provider setting are operated by school districts under regulation of the OSDE. Under the grant application all public school pre-K programs will participate in the QRIS.

However, a majority of center-based programs that qualify for exemptions participate in the current state QRIS on a voluntary basis already.

Finances and Staffing:

Oklahoma is eligible to qualify for up to \$60 million in grant funding. The application funding request reflects this figure.

The application proposes eleven new temporary full time employees (FTE's) to oversee and implement the grant if awarded. All staff will be for the life of the grant, with the exception of one position funded through OSDH for an additional Child Care Warmline employee. This FTE will only become permanent if it is approved and future funding is available.

The only expansion proposed in the application is the addition of six new Smart Start Communities. These will be funded by \$180,000 in seed funding through the grant. Any additional ongoing funding must occur through the reallocation of existing funds or private money.