

Washington State Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge 2015 Evaluation Report Results in Brief

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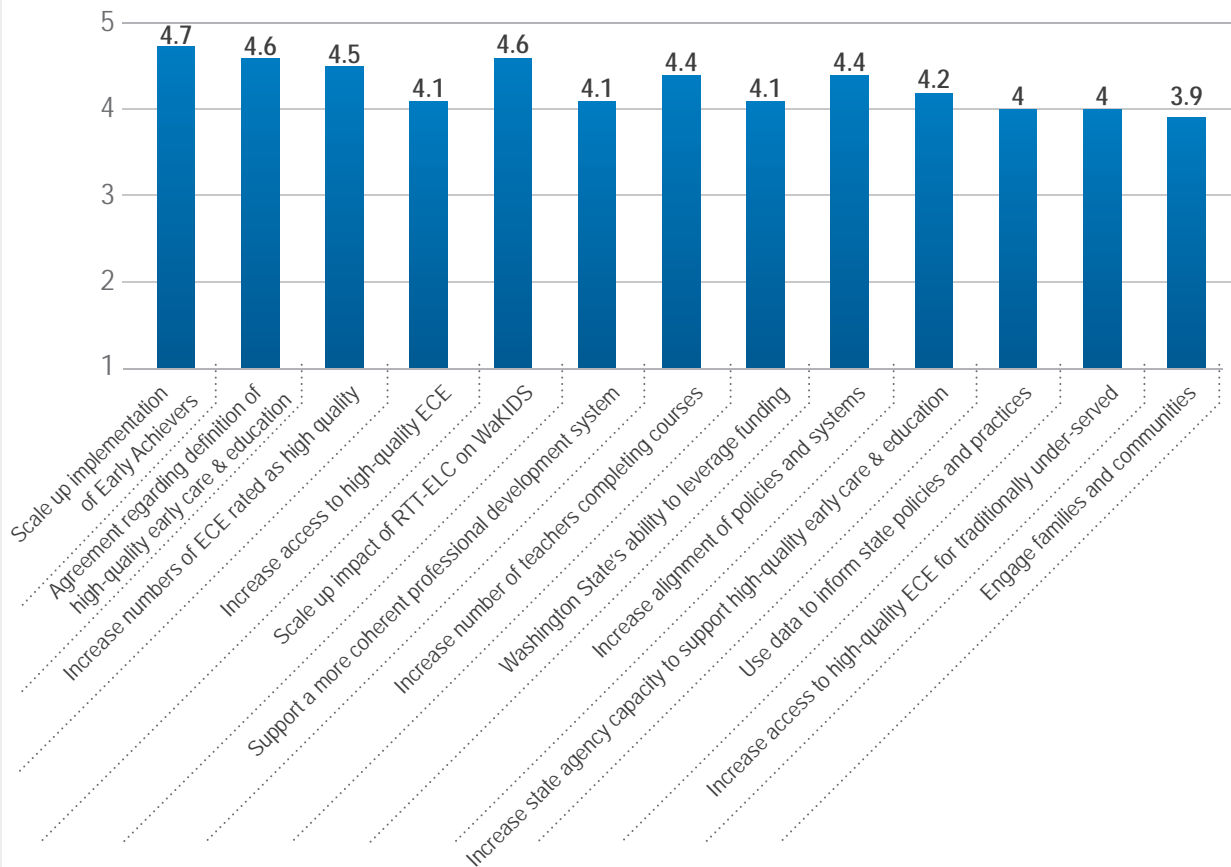
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Written by
Diane Schilder

What the Evaluation Team Found

The federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) award of \$60 million to Washington has, after three years of implementation, achieved all short-term outcomes and made substantial progress toward longer-term outcomes. Analysis of survey data collected from Washington stakeholders, secondary data, and documents provides evidence that Washington has used the federal RTT-ELC to achieve desired outcomes. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. ECE Stakeholders' Report of Impact of RTT on... (1 = low • 5 = high)



In brief, the federal funds have been used to leverage foundation funding and state support to:

- **Successfully scale up the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) called Early Achievers.** To date, nearly half of Washington's licensed child care and early education providers participate¹ in Early Achievers. Currently 1,343 child care centers (58% of centers); 868 family child care providers (35% of family child care providers); and 219 Head Start and preschool sites participate, which collectively serve 67,522 children. This is a much higher participation rate than the average state implementing a QRIS. Survey data from 192 early care and education providers, interviews and surveys of early care and education stakeholders, reviews of documents and a very small sample of providers who have been observed multiple times provides evidence of the effect of the RTT-ELC on quality.
- **Successfully scale up of the state's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment system called WaKIDS,** with nearly half of all Washington children entering Kindergarten participating in the assessments. The data are being used in some communities to engage parents and educators to address young children's early learning needs.
- **Scale up a more coherent professional development system.** Washington State has created common curricula and credentials across the state's college system, offering coaching and targeted professional development to enhance specific aspects of quality early learning. More teachers are participating in coursework, which may lead to increases in the number of teachers with credentials. Currently about 25,000 early care and education professionals are taking an average of four courses.

- **Increase alignment of standards.** The state has taken steps to create a more coherent monitoring system by pilot testing a monitoring system that aligns the state preschool standards with the state licensing standards. Moreover, the state tested and implemented an Early Achievers process for the state preschool program and Head Start that aligns with current program standards based on evaluation findings from the first year of the RTT-ELC grant.



¹ Licensed child care centers and family child care homes; tribal and military facilities that are certified for child care subsidy payments; and Head Start and preschool programs are all eligible to participate in Early Achievers.

- **Increase the capacity of the Department of Early Learning (DEL) and other agencies to support high-quality ECE.** Stakeholders commented about the state's increased capacity, alignment, and ability to leverage. One key informant made remarks that captured a recurring theme among study key informants:

“We have taken all of the programs that existed in friendly silos and we are creating a single system. Head Start was in one division, pre-K was another, and licensing another. I have been pushing for this to be one system. We have one common metric for quality, and it is Early Achievers.”

- **Increase stakeholder's ability to use data to inform policy.** Many state early care and education stakeholders reported that RTT-ELC has had an impact on the ability to access and use data to inform decisions. A state agency staff member stated:

“... there has been a very big impact because we didn't even have the data [before the RTT-ELC funding.] Even within the field it has created a data-driven culture. Now we have the data.”

A state implementation team member reported:

“... without an external push as big as RTT, one that requires so much accountability, we wouldn't have been as successful. No way.”

- **Increase access to high-quality early care and education for traditionally under-served groups.** Early Achievers is currently serving more than 67,000 children, the majority of whom are from low-income families.
- **Engage families and communities in young children's early care and education.** Stakeholders reported that Early Achievers and WaKIDS include families and community engagement. Providers reported that they are improving their communications with families about their children.
- **Increased use of data to inform decisions.** Stakeholders reported that the RTT-ELC funds have been used to collect, analyze and report data that are now being used to inform state policy decisions.

Stakeholders reported that the robust combination of activities have resulted in desired outcomes. One study participant noted,

“... I've been at this for 30 years, and we have never touched as many providers in as substantive a way. I thought I'd retire and never see this. There is a big upside. . . We are changing the everyday lives of loads of kids. We are impacting thousands. . .when I think about what we are doing, it is spine tingling.”



To meet the needs of young children, particularly those at high risk, state investment is needed to maintain the quality of education and care that Washington State has achieved for its young children with high need.

Actions Recommended

Evidence suggests that in the absence of a state investment of approximately \$70 million for the next two years, Washington will no longer be able to fund the work of Early Achievers at the current participation rate and progress and quality improvement efforts will lose momentum.

To meet the needs of young children, particularly those at high risk, state investment is needed to:

a) maintain the quality of education and care that Washington State has achieved for its young children with high need; b) enhance the quality for care among providers who are currently rating low in Early Achievers; and c) expand participation of providers in Early Achievers.

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative evaluation data revealed consensus on three recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1.** The state should support the investments that were initiated through the federal grant.
Rationale: Now that Washington has data showing the need for quality improvement, it is important for the state to invest in enhancing quality, especially in the settings that serve the state's most vulnerable, low-income children who, research has shown, benefit the most from high-quality early learning.
- **Recommendation 2.** Early Achievers should retain the highest-quality bar and ensure that supports are available to help providers achieve the bar.
Rationale: Prior research suggests that "a little bit of quality" does not yield results for children, and research suggests that raising standards without supports is ineffective.
- **Recommendation 3.** The state should continue to support a framework of using data to engage in continuous improvement.
Rationale: Washington has demonstrated appropriate use of the data that have been collected with the support of federal RTT-ELC funds, using information to improve quality program design and implementation and foster a more cohesive, aligned system.

Analysis of data collected from 192 early education providers, 41 state stakeholders, reviews of secondary data and document reviews reveal that the RTT-ELC has achieved desired early outcomes that are consistent with previously published research on the links between quality and child outcomes. Study participants summarized the perceived impacts of the grant on Washington's early education system:

“Child outcomes ultimately come down to child/teacher interaction, and the only way we can get the results we want is to move the interactions. We need tailored coaching, supports, and coursework to move that needle.”

“What we have learned is that this is a very high-touch process, and it requires money. Without the money to lead providers through that process, we will not be able to move them along and increase quality.”



About the Study and Its Authors

The RTT-ELC was launched in 2011 by the federal government to reward states that created comprehensive plans to: (1) increase the percentage of children with high needs enrolled in high-quality early learning programs; (2) design and implement an integrated system of high-quality early learning programs and services; and (3) ensure that early childhood assessments conformed with the National Research Council's recommendations. In 2011, Washington State was awarded a \$60 million RTT-ELC grant. The federal RTT-ELC competition awarded points based on the degree to which each state described how it would develop and scale up: a) a successful early care and education state system; b) high-quality accountable programs; c) systems that promote early learning and development outcomes for children with high needs; d) supports for a great early childhood workforce; and e) systems to measure progress and outcomes. Applicants were eligible to earn additional points for including all early learning and development programs in the Quality Ratings and Improvement System and for addressing the status of children's learning and development at kindergarten entry.

An external evaluation of the overall grant program was not required but the BUILD Initiative recognized that an independent evaluation could inform continuous improvement and policy and provide strategies for other states to adopt or adapt. The BUILD Initiative, funded by a consortium of private foundations, chose to focus on Washington for its first Early Learning Challenge grantee state study. BUILD contracted with Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) to conduct an independent evaluation to examine Washington State's progress in carrying out the plan that was submitted, stakeholder perceptions of early impact of the RTT-ELC, and opportunities to strengthen and build on the early accomplishments.

Diane Schilder, a senior research scientist at EDC led the study. Diane serves as principal investigator of evaluations funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and has led evaluations funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, and state education agencies. Diane has served as senior analyst for the Harvard Family Research Project and for the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Melissa Dahlin, Meghan Broadstone, Jennifer Crandall, and Kelley O'Carroll work at EDC in a research and evaluation capacity and contributed to the study.



*Schilder, D., (2015). Washington State
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