



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



September 18, 2014

Deborah Gist
Commissioner
Rhode Island Department of Education
255 Westminster St.
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Commissioner Gist,

On June 19, 2014, a team from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), (the Departments), conducted a desk monitoring of Rhode Island's implementation of its approved Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant (RTT-ELC). This monitoring aims to continue the collaborative relationship that began at the grant award and development of the scope of work. It provides the Departments with a deeper understanding of each State's overall performance through the progress; success, challenges and strategies for the implementation of its RTT-ELC State Plan; and the fiscal management of the grant funds. It also helps us tailor the technical assistance to each State's specific needs.

The desk monitoring included a review of the State's monthly calls, Annual Performance Report (APR), and other documents that provided evidence of the State's implementation progress. The review focused on the following RTT-ELC key reform areas:

- Successful State Systems
- High Quality Programs
- Focus Investments for improvement in areas such as: workforce development, family engagement, health promotions, data systems, early learning standards and comprehensive assessment systems

Enclosed is a summary report based upon this review. The report includes highlights of Rhode Island's implementation of RTT-ELC and a snapshot of Rhode Island's progress under each RTT-ELC reform area. The report includes "next steps" to ensure that Rhode Island implements RTT-ELC consistent with its approved application, scope of work and timelines identified in its project plans.

Rhode Island should respond to the "next steps" through the ongoing monthly calls with the ED/HHS Program Officers. This report will be posted on the RTT-ELC website. We also note that, based on a combination of factors that includes a change in the Program Director last year, a low level of expenditures by the State, and the lack of a previous Federal site visit, we will be doing an onsite monitoring visit for Rhode Island on September 16-17, 2014. The information

we learn during this visit will inform our overall assessment of Rhode Island's progress on its RTT-ELC grant and may cause us to modify our conclusions in this report. Upon completion of that visit, we will complete a similar report and post it on the RTT-ELC website.

Additionally, the Departments may issue a comprehensive summary of each State's implementation of RTT-ELC that includes information gathered through the desk monitoring process and provides details about the innovative practices and common challenges that States are facing as they implement early learning reforms throughout the State.

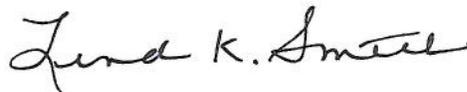
We want to thank you and your staff for your hard work in implementing early learning reforms through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC). If you have any questions or there are ways that the Departments' staff can provide additional support as you implement your RTT-ELC grant, please feel free to reach out to your ED/HHS contacts.

We look forward to continuing our work with you and supporting Rhode Island's technical assistance needs to ensure successful implementation of RTT-ELC. Thank you for your commitment to Rhode Island's youngest children.

Sincerely,



Libby Doggett
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Office of Early Learning
Office of Elementary and Secondary
Education
U.S. Department of Education



Linda K. Smith
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early
Childhood Development
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services

Enclosure

Cc: Governor Lincoln Chafee



RTT-ELC Part B Desk Monitoring Report

Monitoring Information	
State Lead Agency	Rhode Island Department of Education
State Participating Agencies	Rhode Island Department of Human Services Rhode Island Department of Health Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services Rhode Island Early Learning Council
Grant Period	January 2012 – December 2015
Current Year of Grant	Year 3 of 4
RTT-ELC Monitoring Period	January 2012 – May 2014
RTT-ELC Monitoring Activity	Desk Monitoring
Monitoring Review Date(s)	June 19, 2014
State Participants	Melissa Emidy Michelle Palermo Erica Mandeville
U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services Project Officers	Deborah Spitz, ED Ngozi Onunaku, HHS

Overview of RTT-ELC Monitoring

The Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services (the Departments) are committed to supporting States as they implement ambitious early learning reform agendas through their RTT-ELC grant. Consistent with this commitment, the Departments have designed a monitoring process to assess a State’s implementation of the program requirements and its approved Scope of Work for RTT-ELC and the State-level systems and processes needed to support implementation.

Monitoring

In the desk monitoring, State implementation of RTT-ELC was reviewed across several key areas: Successful State Systems, High Quality Programs and Focus Investments, which represent the core priorities for implementation as outlined in the RTT-ELC Part B Desk Monitoring Protocol. In each area, the Departments identified key elements that are required under RTT-ELC and are likely to increase the quality of early learning programs and lead to increased quality early learning opportunities for young children and their families. Through the examination of documentation submitted by the State and interviews with the State staff, the Departments assessed the effectiveness of implementation of RTT-ELC by identifying the extent to which the State is:

1. Ensuring that the projects and activities are carried out consistent with the timelines outlined in the State's Early Learning State Plan.
2. Collaborating with all Early Learning programs and using system processes and standards to achieve the outcomes and results outlined in the State Plan and encouraging continuous improvement activities.
3. Establishing systems and processes to sustain implementation and improvements.

The report contains the following sections:

- ***Highlights of the State's Implementation.*** This section identifies key accomplishments in the State's implementation of RTT-ELC.
- ***Status of Implementation of RTT-ELC.*** This section indicates the State's implementation progress based on the information and data collected.
- ***Elements Requiring Next Steps.*** This section identifies any elements for which the State is not on target for meeting its timelines outlined in the approved scope of work and includes next steps that the State must take to meet the grant outcomes.
- ***Recommendations to Strengthen Implementation.*** This section provides recommendations to support the State in continuing to meet the goals and timelines of its RTT-ELC grant.
- ***Additional Comment.*** As appropriate, this section includes any additional information related to the State's implementation of RTT-ELC not included elsewhere.

Highlights of the State's RTT-ELC Implementation

- In 2013, Rhode Island revised its Early Learning and Development Standards, which included standards for English Language Learners reviewed by national experts. The standards were developed to be relevant for children with disabilities to ensure that all children can meet learning goals.
- Rhode Island finalized Workforce Knowledge and Competencies (WKC)s for teachers, teaching assistants, and Family Care providers, and developed processes to ensure that all professional development efforts are aligned to the WKC)s.
- Rhode Island established a statewide Center for Professional Development that implements program improvement grants, develops content on what providers should know and be able to do, and provides technical assistance to help programs move up the tiers of its Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS).
- Rhode Island aligned its licensing, TQRIS, and early education regulations to create one set of quality program standards for early learning and care providers.

Status of Implementation of RTT-ELC

The Departments use a monitoring and accountability rubric to help determine progress of the State's implementation. Their rubric includes three implementation status levels:

- **Level 1 – *Developing:*** the State is in the process of developing this activity, or the activity is very new. The State may be facing challenges in implementation, roll-out, or communications with stakeholders.

- **Level 2 – *Implementing***: the State has developed and implemented the activity, although the activity might still benefit from adjustments, training, or communications with stakeholders.
- **Level 3 – *Sustaining & Continuing Improvement***: the activity is well-established in the State, and may be undergoing a process of evaluation or program improvement. Stakeholders and users have been trained and/or communications strategies have been established.

Element	Status
Successful State Systems	
The State Lead Agency has a process to monitor grant and sub-recipients activities to ensure implementation of the goals and performance measures outlined in the approved RTT-ELC State Plan.	Sustaining & Continuing Improvement
State public awareness activities are targeted to all communities and families with children of high needs.	Sustaining & Continuing Improvement
High Quality Programs	
The State has established statewide developmentally appropriate standards of early learning and systems that drive improvements in workforce development, program licensing, early learning environments and activities that help prepare children to be school ready.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The state is on schedule to require programs meet state-wide standards of Early Learning no later than the year 2015. 	Implementing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing a comprehensive Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) no later than year 3 of the RTT-ELC grant. 	Implementing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State data show an increase of Early Learning and Development Programs participating in the TQRIS. 	Implementing
Focus Investments	
The State has identified focus areas that will support and enhance the outcome, quality and sustainability of the State’s overall RTT-ELC plan to improve programs and prepare children to be school ready.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State early learning standards are aligned with the Kindergarten through third grade standards. 	Sustaining & Continuing Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State has in place a system to develop and sustain a highly skilled early childhood workforce. 	Implementing

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementing data collection system for tracking student outcomes from kindergarten entry through third grade no later than 2015. 	Developing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every child entering Kindergarten participates in a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KEA). 	Developing

Elements Requiring Next Steps:

- There have been some delays in the development of Rhode Island’s early learning data system. Rhode Island has requested technical assistance in the area of data governance, and has applied to ED/HHS for approval to provide additional staffing to overcome these challenges. Next steps include continuing quality assurance testing for newly developed components, building a user acceptance test plan, and completing the development of the common application core data elements’ collection screens.
- Rhode Island’s timelines for establishing a KEA will be adjusted due to the State’s participation in a multi-State Enhanced Assessment Grant Consortium, which will review all of the KEAs in the participating States to develop a common instrument by 2017.

Recommendations to Strengthen Implementation:

- Rhode Island did not meet its performance targets related to TQRIS participation, due to a delay in procuring a TQRIS vendor, and delays due to the implementation of new standards and regulations. This has resulted in delays processing applications and rating programs. The Departments recommend a continued and focused effort by the State to identify and address those challenges.
- A Facilities Needs Assessment commissioned in 2013 indicates that many of Rhode Island’s early learning programs cannot move up in TQRIS ratings due to facilities limitations relating to group size and health and safety regulations. The Departments recommend thoughtful use of the TA set-aside funds and federally-provided technical assistance to support the State Team in addressing this concern.

Additional Comment:

- Rhode Island’s expenditures in the first two years of its grant were under budget. This was due primarily to delays in procurement and hiring. Timely spending is critical if Rhode Island is to carry out its ambitious plans within the four-year grant period. The Departments will continue to monitor the State’s spending to ensure timely use of grant funds.