



RACE TO THE TOP-EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE: ACTION STEPS FOR STATE PREPARATION

The U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS) recently announced proposed criteria for the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC). While the timeline is not entirely finalized, the application is now expected to be released in August with responses due in the fall, likely mid-October. To help states in their preparation, we outline below some steps that can be taken immediately to help submit the best possible application by the deadline. In many states some or all of these actions are already underway.

1. Identify the Project's Leadership Team

The application identifies several state agencies that must be a part of the grant application. These agencies and a small number of other key stakeholders should develop a leadership group of no more than 8-10 people to help steer the application. While a lead agency and grant writer should be identified, it is likely that no single state agency will have the expertise needed to address each of the application's questions, so agencies should be strategically represented on the leadership team. Developing a small team comprised of leading agencies can not only lead to a better application, it can build better aligned commitment and support for early learning in ways that help the state whether it wins the grant or not.

A small leadership group working collaboratively through regular meetings, conference calls, and/or emails can help ensure coherence and comprehensiveness in the work. The leadership team can establish "ground rules" for the collaborative work regarding how decisions will be made and communicated, how participation will be encouraged, and how conflicts will be resolved. A single individual closely tied to the governor and/or lead agency should be designated as a point person for the effort, and given the authority necessary to keep the work moving forward. In many states the leadership group will be explicitly connected to the state's Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC).

2. Identify Resources to Support the Application Process

Creating a thoughtful approach and writing the required grant takes time and money. State and philanthropic resources can help ensure that the state has adequate capacity to develop an excellent application. Among the areas to tackle: a group to develop the vision (see leadership team above) with appropriate input from stakeholders; people to undertake necessary research and plan development; and grant writing. One-time spending could include, for example, grant writing, supporting travel to meetings, and outside experts, both to provide content expertise and to provide an outside "critical friend." The Early Learning Challenge Collaborative can assist with this effort.

3. *Develop a Mission Statement*

Some states already have a broad plan or mission statement that drives all early learning work. If the state does not already have one, work to develop one should begin immediately. The idea is that a clear mission can help the state frame its grant response as a thoughtful whole with intentionally interconnected elements, rather than as a series of discrete programs and initiatives. The state's analysis of its existing status and its goals for future improvement should be closely tied to the articulated mission.

Developing guiding principles may also be helpful as a state develops its plan. Guiding principles are a set of accepted guidelines or “touchstones” that capture the leadership team’s values and priorities to assist in evaluating recommended strategies to advance mission, goals, and objectives. The mission should address the full range of needs for children from birth (or earlier) through kindergarten entry, and should be integrated with the state's K-12 agenda. This is where the state should describe its “big bets” on how to leverage the Challenge to transform systems and improve child outcomes. The leadership team and ELAC should drive this work, potentially with the help of an outside facilitator.

4. *Prepare Brief Summaries of Existing Work and Articulated Plans*

The final criteria for the application have not been announced, but the key areas of focus are not expected to change significantly. Accordingly, states should now be inventorying their current status and plans in the policy areas expected to be part of the application. Putting “straw man” ideas on paper and then fleshing them out may be an effective method of engaging stakeholders and developing concrete final plans. A template is being provided to help facilitate this process.

5. *Identify or Create the Work Groups for Individual Grant Areas*

Each state will likely have policymakers and leaders who are expert in and work across the full spectrum of policy areas implicated in the grant program – standards, assessments, data, tiered quality standards, higher education partnerships, and more. There will also likely be experts and practitioners with specific expertise in each of these policy areas as well as in areas such as special education, maternal and child health, early childhood mental health, and cultural and linguistic diversity. States may want to create work groups connected to the leadership team to develop recommendations for each of the application's areas. Some states will already have existing work groups on some or all of the policy areas included, particularly those states with active Early Learning Advisory Councils.

Work groups should be charged with identifying themes and broad plans in late July and August, so that more detailed drafts can be prepared as soon as the application comes out. Plans with budgets – potentially including multiple budget options for the leadership team to consider – should then be finalized in early September. The leadership team will be responsible for making sure that work groups understand their assignments, and then synthesizing the results of the work group process; the leadership team should make sure that at least one reviewer is considering the application from a comprehensive and systemic viewpoint.

6. *Plan for Outreach and Engagement*

While the drafting of the application will be driven by the most active stakeholders, there should be wide outreach to encourage feedback from the wider community. The plan for this outreach should be built into the overall work schedule. Not only will the Departments be looking to see that states sought broad input into their applications, but the feedback received should help strengthen all elements of the application – and strengthen the state community's understanding of an engagement in the work of the Challenge.

7. *Get Everybody Ready for the Homestretch*

The application's exact due date is unknown, and policymakers' schedules are notoriously subject to change. However, those shepherding a state RTT-ELC application should make sure that policy leaders are informed of the timeline, and will be ready to weigh in as needed in late September or early October. Staff to key decision-makers should be included in the process to the extent possible, or simply kept updated if they prefer. Finally, the leadership group should block off times near the application deadline in order to finalize the application.