

SECTION IV: APPLICATION

Part 1: State Plan Overview

A. Provide an executive summary of the State’s Phase 2 RTT-ELC plan. Please include an explanation of why the State believes the activities in its Phase 2 plan will have the greatest impact on advancing its overall statewide reform plan.

As articulated in our Phase 1 application, Illinois is focused on implementing early childhood systems reform that will lead to an increase in the number of children—especially Children with High Needs—who enter kindergarten ready to engage in a challenging curriculum. To this end, we have established these goals (note: these goal targets have been adjusted to reflect both the reduced funding available through this grant and the more rigorous criteria which have been developed for QRIS Levels 4 and 5 since our Phase 1 application was submitted):

- By December 2016, increase to at least 65% the percentage of Children with High Needs who have at least one year of participation in a high-quality (QRIS Level 4 or 5) Early Learning and Development Program prior to kindergarten entry.
- By December 2016, increase to at least 40% the percentage of Children with High Needs who have two years or more years of participation in a high quality Early Learning and Development Program prior to kindergarten entry.
- By December 2016, increase to at least 10% the percentage of Children with High Needs who receive five years of high quality early learning services before kindergarten, including home visiting services or QRIS Level 4 or 5 early care and education in the infant and toddler years.

To achieve these goals and in recognition of the current system's needs, the State's early childhood reform agenda is organized around three strategic priorities: (1) deepening the integration of state supports to create a unified framework for all Early Learning and Development (ELD) systems; (2) connecting the most at-risk children with the services and

supports they need; and (3) increasing the quality of both learning environments and instruction in early learning and development programs (from “adequate to good” and from “good to great”). These strategic priorities cut across various sections of this Plan, and collectively build toward the State's vision for an integrated system including quality universal and targeted supports for all children from birth to kindergarten entry and beyond.

Strategic Reform Priority #1: Deepening the integration of state supports to create a unified framework for all early learning and development programs

As detailed in Criterion (A) (3) below, Illinois will implement a governance structure that will support greater integration across the multiple funding streams and agencies involved in early childhood in our state. The Leadership Team (comprising agency leaders and the Illinois Early Learning Council Co-Chairs) and the Inter-Agency Team (comprising leaders of agency divisions focused on early childhood) will meet regularly to develop an integrated approach to supporting high quality ELD Programs and to review progress in meeting the performance measures outlined in this grant. Staff in the Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) in the Office of the Governor will lead Interagency Project Teams focused on the QRIS implementation, workforce development, community collaboration, and data and outcomes measurement to ensure maximum coordination and integration of efforts across agencies. Key aspects of integration to be implemented include:

- The new QRIS that will include all ELD Programs serving children in groups, including child care centers and homes, Preschool for All, center-based Prevention Initiative, center-based Head Start/Early Head Start, and preschool special education (Criteria (B)(1)-(B)(2)).
- A new statewide website that will provide parents information about all programs in the QRIS, and a public awareness campaign that will inform parents how to use the new quality ratings as they select early education and care programs for their children (Criterion (B)(3)).
- A validation study of the QRIS that includes child outcomes will be completed to help inform the continual improvement of this system (Criterion (B)(5)).
- A comprehensive statewide plan for supporting professional development for EC

Educators that incorporates all state-funded supports and, to the extent possible, supports provided through Head Start/Early Head Start and local-level entities such as school districts. (Criterion (D)(2)).

- Use of a common statewide instrument for assessing children across the kindergarten year, the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (“KIDS”) (Criterion (E)(1)).
- Data systems that track the services that children and families receive, children’s learning and development outcomes, program quality features, and EC Educators credentials (Criterion (E)(2)).
- Use of the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards throughout all ELD Programs in the State (note: funding for implementing the standards is integrated into the statewide training plan and into the supports for programs seeking to move up in the QRIS; therefore we are not separately including activities under Criterion (C)(1)).

Strategic Reform Priority #2: Connecting the most-at-risk children with the supports and services they need

In our Phase 1 application, we proposed to implement a comprehensive community collaboration model in 15 Concentrated High Need Communities and to provide significant annual funding to these communities to support local collaborative work. With the reduced funding available, this approach is not feasible. Nevertheless, the State recognizes the need to support emerging local collaborations that are focused on ensuring that children with the highest needs are connected with high quality early learning and development services.

Our current Early Childhood Action Partnership initiative (funded with State Advisory Council Grant funds and launched in June, 2012) has demonstrated that there is strong interest in technical assistance and other resources among both long-standing and newly formed local collaborations focused on early childhood throughout the state. Through this initiative, the State has identified a conceptual framework for community systems building developed by the National Center for Children in Poverty, and has invested in the development of a website,

training materials, and technical assistance models for local collaborations that have great promise but need additional resources to be maintained past April, 2012. In addition, we now have six “Hard-to-Reach” pilot projects operating across the state, and they have been generating information about effective strategies for engaging the most at risk children and their families in high quality services at the local level.

To effectively build on these recent successes, we will implement a scaled-down version of the Consortium for Community Systems Development (CCSD) to provide training, technical assistance, and supportive materials to local collaborations, building upon the success of the Early Childhood Action Partnership initiative. Part of the work of the CCSD will be to assist local communities in developing philanthropic and other local resources to support collaborative efforts, a strategy which has proven effective and sustainable in several communities across the state. (Note: Activities related to support for community collaborations previously appeared in multiple criteria, but in this revised Plan they are placed in Criterion (B)(4).)

Strategic Reform Priority # 3: Increasing Program Quality: From Adequate to Good and from Good to Great

In our Phase 1 application, we proposed many different strategies for increasing program quality. Although we will be scaling back most activities as described in the narrative to follow, we will be implementing many of these strategies statewide, including:

- Adding an additional 16 FTE Quality Specialists across the 16 regional Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (distributed among the agencies according to provider density), and providing intensive training and support to both new and existing Quality Specialists in how to effectively support programs’ quality improvement efforts (Criterion (B)(4)).
- Developing and providing trainings (including web-based trainings) related to the requirements of the QRIS and/or the required competencies for credentials in the Gateways to Opportunity credentialing system (Criteria (B)(4) and (D)(2)).
- Supporting the development of new coursework and training models and strengthening

IHE faculty knowledge and skills in the critical areas of early math, use of assessment and standards to drive instruction, and supporting English Language Learners in early childhood (Criterion (D)(2)).

- Ensuring that early learning is included in major statewide efforts to strengthen the quality of instruction in the K-12 system, including the Center for School Improvement and the Illinois Shared Learning Environment (Criteria (B)(4) and (E)(2)).

In addition, we will select six to eight Communities of Concentrated High Need from across the state where additional resources will be concentrated to raise the quality of services Children with High Needs receive. Each of these communities will comprise approximately 4-5,000 Children with High Needs and will be chosen based on several criteria, including: 1) level of concentrated need; 2) presence of a mix of higher and lower quality providers that have demonstrated interest in continual improvement; 3) presence of an established or emerging community collaboration among early childhood providers (including local school districts); and 4) support of local community leadership for a community-wide effort to improve the quality of and access to early learning services for young children and their families. We expect that some of the selected communities will be current participants in our MIECHV-funded Strong Foundations Partnership.

These selected communities will engage in a local planning process (with support from OECD and the CCSD) to determine the targeted strategies that will have the greatest impact on increasing the number and percentage of Children with High Needs in their community that are enrolled in high quality ELD Programs. A flexible pool of resources will support the implementation of these local plans. The strategies communities may choose among will include the many strategies that were proposed for wider implementation in our Phase 1 application (note: the strategies selected may support both Strategic Reform Priorities 2 and 3):

- Supporting cohort-based training and support of providers as they work toward higher quality levels in the QRIS
- Intensive coaching to support programs in meeting the requirements of the Level 5 component Awards of Excellence
- Providing small grants to providers to implement program improvements, such as the

purchase of curriculum materials or minor renovations to allow for smaller group sizes for children in child care settings

- Scholarships for educators to obtain coursework for needed credentials, especially the ESL/Bilingual Approval or Endorsement that will be required for PFA teachers working with English Language Learning children after 2014 and the Gateways to Opportunity Level 5 Infant Toddler Credential that will be required for Prevention Initiative center based programs by 2015
- Enhanced recruitment of the highest need children to ensure that they participate in available programs
- Enhanced family engagement strategies, including implementing the Strengthening Families approach
- Technical assistance in developing models that link children in informal family child care settings with more formal preschool experiences (e.g., the Community Connections model described in our Phase 1 application)
- Piloting policy changes within the Child Care Assistance Program to support children's continuous enrollment in high quality programs

The communities will be identified by January 1, 2013 and will be engaged in planning through December 31, 2013. Implementation of identified strategies will begin in 2014.

Our state's revised Plan will allow us to: strengthen the coordination and integration of existing funding streams devoted to early learning and development; develop the necessary state-level infrastructure for an efficiently administered and sustainable QRIS; develop the data system structure that will allow for tracking of progress towards goals and objectives developed by the Illinois Early Learning Council; increase the availability and quality of workforce development/professional development resources; pilot a variety of strategies for improving program quality and ensuring the most at-risk children participate in high quality programs; and implement a statewide Kindergarten assessment that will both inform instruction and provide valuable information about the status of young children's learning and development. All of the strategies presented in our plan are in service of the goal of supporting the early learning and development of young Children with High Needs and improving their readiness to engage in a

challenging curriculum when they enter kindergarten.