



Department of Education submits application for Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge to improve the quality of early childhood programs for 75,000 low-income students across New Jersey
Governor Christie signs Executive Order 77 to improve coordination between state agencies around early childhood programs

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Trenton, NJ – The Department of Education today submitted the state’s application for the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge to the US Department of Education. This application would help to improve the quality of programs for over 75,000 low-income children from birth to age five in non-Abbott school districts across New Jersey. To advance this initiative, Governor Christie signed Executive Order 77 establishing the Early Learning Commission, which is charged with recommending improvements to the quality of, and access to, early learning and development programs in the state by coordinating early childhood education, health, and development programs across Departments and expanding New Jersey’s Quality Rating Improvement System. This Commission will be chaired by the Commissioner of Education and include the Chairperson of the New Jersey Council for Young Children and representatives from the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Health and Senior Services, and the Department of Human Services.

"We are committed to ensuring that we prepare all students, regardless of zip code, for success in college and career. In order to do that, children must first be ready for kindergarten," said Acting Commissioner Christopher D. Cerf. "Through close collaboration with the Departments of Children and Families, Health and Senior Services, and Human Services, and stakeholders from across the state, we have developed a proposal that we believe will truly transform early learning and development programs in New Jersey and will strengthen early literacy skills. While the application now is out of our hands and we can't control whether we win this competition, we can control the steps we take to begin to move this from a plan to reality. We are already hard at work with partners from across the state to lay the groundwork for this new system."

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge application builds on the success of the existing State Preschool Program to provide support and oversight to ensure that over 75,000 low-income children from birth to age five in early childhood centers throughout New Jersey all benefit from a high-quality program. The plan does not create new early childhood programs, but does expand the support and oversight of existing programs serving low-income students across the state.

The application is based around four major priorities:

- 1. Improve the quality of existing early learning programs by expanding NJ’s Quality Rating Improvement System.** NJ’s Quality Rating Improvement System sets standards for high-quality early childhood programs, assesses program quality, and provides training and technical assistance to operators to improve. First piloted by the Build New Jersey Partners for Early Learning (Build NJ) consortium in 2007, NJ’s Quality Rating Improvement System sets high standards for programs in six key areas: program and learning environment, family engagement, health and safety, professional development, personnel, and business practices. Through NJ’s Quality Rating Improvement System, participating early childhood programs will receive a state quality rating, which will serve as a "Consumer Reports" for parents in evaluating early childhood centers for their children.
- 2. Improve educator effectiveness in existing early childhood programs.** In order to ensure that all children are served by high-quality staff, the plan will offer participating educators training in comprehensive early childhood curricula and assessment systems through regional trainings. In addition, the state will focus on increasing the number of early childhood educators with core knowledge and greater credentials by providing tuition assistance and support to existing educators to obtain early childhood credentials.
- 3. Increase family access to information.** In addition to providing families with program quality information through NJ’s Quality Rating Improvement System, which will help parents make informed decisions when selecting early childhood programs, the plan will create county-level councils that will engage parents and community members about the extent to which NJ’s Quality Rating Improvement System works for families.
- 4. Improve use of data to strengthen programs and child performance.** The plan will connect data systems across state departments through the creation of NJ-EASEL (New Jersey Enterprise Analysis for Early Learning), which will improve tracking of individual children and programs. In addition, it will enable a study

to ensure that NJ's Quality Rating Improvement System effectively differentiates quality of program and the development of children. Lastly, the plan will capture children's competencies and skills upon entry to kindergarten to better understand how well current programs are preparing children for kindergarten.

The development of the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge application was a collaborative effort across state agencies, led by the Department of Education. The DOE coordinated over the last several months with leaders from the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Health and Senior Services. In addition, the application has received letters of support from stakeholders across the state including school districts, higher education institutions, early learning and development organizations, community-based organizations, legislators, foundations, professional associations, and families.

The Executive Order can be found [HERE](#)