

# The Early Learning Challenge Fund

Adopting a Systems Approach to Early Childhood Policies, Programs & Services



READY 4 K

## The Early Learning Challenge Fund

An initiative of the Obama Administration, the Early Learning Challenge Fund would establish a competitive grant process for states to develop comprehensive quality early learning systems for children birth to five, particularly those who are at risk of starting school not fully prepared.

Two types of grants are being proposed, **Quality Pathways Grants** and **Development Grants**.

The Quality Pathways Grants are for states that already have many of the system components in place and the Development Grants are for states that have pieces of a system but need resources to move to a comprehensive system.

The bill would provide funding of \$1 billion/year for 8 years, with up to 65% of the funds (up to 85% in subsequent years) reserved for Quality Pathways grants. It is not clear how many states will be awarded Quality Pathways or Development grants, but some reports indicate that as few as five states would receive each type of grant.

The Early Learning Challenge Fund is currently under consideration in the U.S. Congress as part of the federal Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (SAFRA or HR 3221). SAFRA passed the House Education and Labor Committee in July and the full House in September. Action is expected in the Senate Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee and on the Senate floor by the end of 2009 or early 2010.

The Early Learning Challenge Fund emphasizes a systemic approach, not just funding programs and services, but encouraging states to create an integrated and effective early childhood system. States can use the grants to further several aspects of a quality early learning system and must include all early childhood settings, such as child care, Head Start and school based programs.

The Early Learning Challenge Fund would be jointly managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (which administers Head Start and Child Care programs) and the Department of Education. The bill does not specify a lead state department, but States must coordinate grant activities with the Early Childhood Advisory Council, which Governor Pawlenty appointed in 2008.

## The Build Systems Framework

The national Build Initiative has developed a framework for state early childhood systems-building efforts that closely aligns with the Early Learning Challenge Fund. Minnesota is one of seven states to participate in the Build Initiative. Ready 4 K serves as the manager of Minnesota Build.

The Build framework includes two parts:

1. The **SERVICES** that need to be integrated so that children are thriving and families are successful. This framework incorporates a comprehensive view of children's needs within the context of family and community, with four "sub-systems" providing the necessary programs and services. Known colloquially as the "four ovals" framework, it includes programs/services related to:

- **Early Learning**
- **Health, Mental Health and Nutrition**
- **Family Support**
- **Special Needs/Early Intervention**

2. The **CORE COMPONENTS**, or **INFRASTRUCTURE**, that are needed to support the programs/services. These include:

- **Governance:** a structure that sets policy direction for the entire system
- **Standards:** quality standards for programs and early learning standards for children
- **Accountability:** tracking of program performance and results based on standards
- **Financing:** resources sufficient to provide comprehensive quality services based on standards
- **Provider/Practitioner Support:** professional development and technical assistance to providers
- **Parent Leadership Development/Support:** opportunities for parents to enhance leadership skills around early childhood development
- **Research & Development:** cross-system data, planning, analysis and evaluation
- **Communications:** information for families, providers and the public



## The Build systems framework closely aligns with the Early Learning Challenge Fund.

| <b>To qualify for a Early Learning Challenge grant, states must create or expand:</b><br><small>(based on HR 3221)</small>   | <b>Alignment with Build Systems Core Component</b> |
|--|--|
| A governance structure that oversees a system of early learning programs   | GOVERNANCE and FINANCING                           |
| Early Learning Standards for what children should know and do at various developmental stages that are aligned with K-12 standards, with particular attention paid to children who are English Language Learners (ELL)             | STANDARDS  |
| Program standards and a rating system tied to those standards that apply across different types of early learning settings, including child care, Head Start and schools, plus efforts to improve quality in the range of settings | STANDARDS  |
| A system of program review and monitoring  | ACCOUNTABILITY                                     |
| Proper use of assessments across all domains of child development; curriculum that is aligned with Early Learning Standards  | STANDARDS  |
| A comprehensive plan for professional development of a well-compensated early learning workforce, with a special focus on teaching ELL   | PROVIDER/PRACTITIONER SUPPORT                      |
| Outreach to promote parent’s understanding of early childhood development, the quality rating system, and the rating of their child’s early learning program   | PARENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT/SUPPORT              |
| A coordinated system to facilitate screening, referral, and provision of services related to health, mental health, dental, developmental delay and disability, and family support; and to improve interagency collaboration       | FOUR OVALS FRAMEWORK and GOVERNANCE                |
| A process for evaluating school readiness that reflects all developmental domains  | ACCOUNTABILITY                                     |
| A coordinated data infrastructure for uniform data collection on early learning programs, and integration of early learning and K-12 data systems  | ACCOUNTABILITY and RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT          |

### Issues for Consideration

To achieve the goal of the Early Learning Challenge Fund, which is to increase the number of low-income children in high quality early learning programs, it is critical to develop and fund both the services to children and families and the infrastructure of an early childhood system.

The Early Learning Challenge Fund primarily addresses the infrastructure components. Other state and federal resources, such as Child Care Assistance and Head Start, must also be expanded to increase access to high quality early learning for the most at-risk children and families.

**Minnesota will be better positioned to be awarded an Early Learning Challenge grant if we adopt a systems approach to our early childhood policies, programs and services.**

It is not yet clear how Minnesota will fare in the grant competition. While Minnesota already has some system components in place; for instance, Early Learning Standards for children were developed by DHS and MDE, respectively, and a quality rating and improvement system is being piloted, other system components need attention.

Minnesota needs to assess our progress in each of the core component areas and take the necessary steps to improve those areas that are not fully developed.

In addition to demonstrating progress in developing the core system components, priority in awarding grants goes to states that have used their federal child care funding for quality initiatives and that have built public-private partnerships. Minnesota is well-positioned on both these fronts.

### What Minnesota can do now

- Conduct a thorough assessment of the state’s progress in developing the core components of an effective early childhood system
- Identify gaps in the system, paying particular attention to disparities across race, income and geography
- Pass legislation to develop or expand core components of the early childhood system
- Create a cabinet-level position to oversee a governance structure that integrates early childhood services across state departments
- Continue to fund and expand quality initiatives like the Quality Rating & Improvement System to improve access to quality early learning