

## USING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES™ TO ACHIEVE RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE GOALS

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant competition marks an unprecedented federal investment in state early childhood systems and quality infrastructure. In three rounds of awards, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (the Departments) awarded more than \$1 billion to 20 states to strengthen the foundations of a high quality system of early care and learning opportunities for young children from birth to age five. Successful states were those that proposed ambitious plans and targets to raise program quality, improve outcomes for young children and increase the number of high-need children who are attending high-quality early learning and development programs.

The RTT-ELC competition offered states the opportunity to use Strengthening Families to accomplish several goals, including to:

- help families build protective factors and building parent capacity;
- involve parents as partners and decision-makers;
- support children's social and emotional development; and
- leverage resources and build partnerships across systems.

What is unique about RTT-ELC is its emphasis on strengthening systems and infrastructure to promote quality improvement. Because Strengthening Families is an approach, not a program model, it is applicable to many of the RTT-ELC grant criteria. Out of the 20 states to receive RTT-ELC grants, 13 included plans to build on existing Strengthening Families work or initiate or deepen early-stage efforts. This brief is based on an analysis of state Race to the Top plans, as well as direct dialogue with states, and is organized around the five core functions that support Strengthening Families implementation and sustainability.<sup>1</sup> These are:

- Build an Infrastructure to advance and sustain the work
- Build parent partnerships
- Deepen knowledge and understanding of a protective factors approach
- Shift practice, policies and systems toward a protective factors approach
- Ensure accountability

The experiences of the RTT-ELC grantee states will add to the knowledge base of how Strengthening Families can support many aspects of a high-quality early childhood system. The table below shows the range and current status of actions that the grantee states are taking to integrate Strengthening Families into their early childhood systems.

<sup>1</sup> For a complete discussion of these five core functions, see <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/resources/leadership-and-planning/SFCoreFunctionsGrid.pdf>.

### **Strengthening Families**

Strengthening Families™ is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is based on engaging families, programs and communities in building five protective factors:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

Using the Strengthening Families framework, more than 30 states are shifting policy and practice to help programs working with children and families focus on protective factors. States apply the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention and other child and family serving systems.

For more information, visit [www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net).

**Table 1: Core Functions of Strengthening Families Implementation in RTT-ELC Grantee States**

| State         | Building Infrastructure to Advance and Sustain the Work (Cross-system Collaboration) | Building Parent Partnerships | Deepening Knowledge and Understanding of Protective Factors |                    | Shifting Practice, Policies and Systems Toward a Protective Factors Approach |                |                          | Ensuring Accountability (QRIS Validation) |
|---------------|--|------------------------------|---|--------------------|--|----------------|--------------------------|---|
|               |  |                              | Core Competencies & Training                                | QRIS Training & TA | Direct Support to Programs   | QRIS Standards | QRIS: SF Self-assessment |   |
| California    | X  | X                            | X   | X                  | X  | X              | X                        |   |
| Colorado      | X  | X                            | X   |                    |  | X              | X                        |   |
| Georgia       | X  | X                            | X   | X                  | X  | X              | X                        | X   |
| Kentucky      | X  | X                            | X   | X                  | X  | X              | X                        |   |
| Maryland      | X  | X                            | X   |                    |  |                |                          |   |
| Massachusetts | X  | X                            | X   | X                  |  | X              | X                        |   |
| Michigan      | X  | X                            | X   | X                  |  | X              |                          |   |
| Minnesota     |  |                              | X   | X                  |  |                |                          | X   |
| New Jersey    | X  | X                            | X   | X                  | X  | X              | X                        | X   |
| Pennsylvania  | X  | X                            | X   | X                  | X  | X              |                          |   |
| Vermont       | X  | X                            | X   | X                  | X  | X              | X                        | X   |
| Washington    | X  | X                            | X   | X                  |  |                | X                        |   |
| Wisconsin     | X  | X                            | X   | X                  |  | X              |                          |   |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>12</b>  | <b>12</b>                    | <b>13</b>   | <b>11</b>          | <b>6</b>   | <b>10</b>      | <b>8</b>                 | <b>4</b>                                  |

## Building an infrastructure to advance and sustain the work

The 13 RTT-ELC grantee states that included Strengthening Families in their applications illustrate the importance of vision, coordinated leadership and an intentional focus on finding opportunities to advance and sustain the work. In some cases, grantee states had long-standing leadership teams in place to hold the vision and coordinate the inclusion of Strengthening Families efforts in the RTT-ELC application. In other cases, it was a single individual or small group who saw the opportunity and held sufficient influence to add Strengthening Families into the state plan. In all cases, the RTT-ELC grants provide resources and offer states opportunities to demonstrate the value of Strengthening Families to decision-makers and stakeholders at all levels of the system.

### *Using Strengthening Families as a Platform for Cross-System Collaboration*

In 12 states, stakeholders from more than one service sector/agency have agreed to adopt the Strengthening Families Protective Factors as an organizing framework for their efforts, are seeking to integrate the approach into multiple types of programs and/or are using the protective factors as common outcomes to guide their work and hold each other accountable.

The **Colorado** Department of Human Services and the Office of Early Childhood are taking a two-generation approach to moving parents and children beyond poverty. Strengthening Families will be a guiding framework for this effort. In **Kentucky**, the Strengthening Families Framework will be implemented statewide across partner agencies, including: Early Childhood Educators, Behavioral Health, Mental Health, Family Resource Centers, Maternal and Child Health, Community Based Services and Public Health.

## Building parent partnerships

RTT-ELC planers and implementers recognize the unique value that parents bring to any effort to achieve good outcomes for young children. They understand that parent partnership begins at the program and service level, where collaboration is based on building relationships between providers and parents. They also recognize that parent partners bring important perspectives and insight to local and state-level leadership teams, and can play a variety of meaningful roles such as engaging other parents and community members and modeling what authentic partnership looks like for service providers. Among the 13 RTT-ELC grantee states implementing Strengthening Families, 12 states support activities that promote parent partnerships at the program, community and/or state level (e.g., funding Community Cafés or Parent Cafés at the program level; including parents on state or local coordinating councils).

The **Maryland** Family Network offers training and an online support community for trained Parent Café facilitators. Staff of Maryland's Network of Child Care Resource Centers have also been trained on parent cafes. In **Kentucky**, Strengthening Families training will be targeted to local Parent Advisory Councils through a Parent Leadership Learning Collaborative in each local community. Strengthening Families is embedded in Regional Interagency Councils. Kentucky also will train Parent Café Facilitators. **Michigan** is supporting Parent Cafés in Pathways to Potential Communities, and offers competitive grants to Great Start Parent Coalitions to cultivate community advisors who are culturally and linguistically responsive to families in different communities. In **Washington**, WaKIDS measures entering kindergarteners' readiness for school and includes an observational whole-child assessment, connections with parents and collaborations with early learning providers. The Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC) includes parent members. The Department of Early Learning (DEL) has a Parent Advisory Group (PAG), Parent Advisory Councils at local ECEAP and Head Start programs and a Parent Advisory Council for statewide IDEA, Part C services. DEL is contracting with the Washington Association for Head Start and ECEAP (WSA) to train Parent Navigators, who will train other parents in peer-

to-peer networks on quality care and education, Early Achievers and the Early Learning Guidelines. The Community Café Leadership Team (CCLT) facilitates meaningful conversations to develop bonding and bridge social capital for families.

## Deepening knowledge and understanding of a protective factors approach

Training and outreach, professional development activities and raising awareness among parents and providers are the primary strategies used to deepen knowledge and understanding of the Strengthening Families approach and the Protective Factors Framework. Among the RTT-ELC grantee states, all 13 either include content related to Strengthening Families in early care and education workforce knowledge and competencies and/or require/encourage providers to participate in Strengthening Families training (regardless of their participation in QRIS).

**Minnesota** continues to embed the five Strengthening Families protective factors into Parent Aware training at the Tier 2 & 3 levels. They have aligned the Minnesota Core Competencies with the protective factors. Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework emphasizes key protective factors, including Nurturing and Attachment, Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development, Parental Resilience and Social and Emotional Competence of Children. The Knowledge and Competency Framework will be the foundation for all approved non-credit based training delivered through professional development system, as well as align with coursework delivered through our higher education system. **Pennsylvania** includes content on its Family Engagement standards (which align to Strengthening Families) in its workforce competencies/training. Pennsylvania KEYS instructors offer ongoing professional development to EC providers regionally. There are plans to expand beyond EC by offering training for professional development instructors within all child-serving systems in Pennsylvania. **Kentucky** is just beginning to embed Strengthening Families training into its workforce development system. The goal is for all EC educators to be trained on Strengthening Families. The state will also provide Strengthening Families training for designated Strengthening Families "experts" to support cross agency implementation.

Eleven of the states require or offer training and technical assistance on Strengthening Families for programs participating in the QRIS.

In **Washington** State, to achieve level two the program director/owner must complete a six-course professional training series including a six-hour QRIS Strengthening Families Training for Early Learning Professionals. Washington State used RTT-ELC to develop and launch the training. **New Jersey** will include Strengthening Families as a component in the QRIS Training academy it will use RTT-ELC to develop. The state plans to use the online protective factors training from the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds and will host face-to-face Strengthening Families workshops and train-the-trainer sessions. **Vermont** has trained 30 individuals in the Strengthening Families Tool Kit (developed by the Idaho AEYC). The 17-hour Strengthening Families training for child care providers has been provided to all types of programs including the current Strengthening Families child care programs. This training will also be core training for the "hub and spoke" model of expanding Strengthening Families into family child care settings. **Michigan** will develop training on its revised family engagement standards (which align to Strengthening Families) and will pilot seven Family Engagement Consultants for home-based providers to support higher quality. **Kentucky** is using RTT-ELC to develop Strengthening Families training for programs and providers. Within **Minnesota's** QRIS, an optional training titled Creating Cultural Connections asks attendees to complete the

Strengthening Families Self-Assessment and Action Plan between sessions. The participant guide for this training includes a description of the five protective factors and the seven strategies and time to discuss areas where their programs already promote the protective factors. Attendees are encouraged to complete the action plan assignment at home, including writing down how they will incorporate more strategies for promoting the protective factors. The Creating Cultural Connections training is part of the Minnesota Child Care Credential for child care providers. In **Wisconsin**, the seven family outcomes from the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework align with the five protective factors from the Strengthening Families framework and training is currently being provided connecting the two frameworks within the context of YoungStar. Three Head Start trainers will deliver the training and support the development of additional trainers. YoungStar, Wisconsin's child care quality rating system, gives extra "points" for early care and education settings that have participated in training on the Protective Factors Framework.

## Shifting practice, policies and systems toward a protective factors approach

At its heart, Strengthening Families is about changing how service providers interact with families to support them in building protective factors. The RTT-ELC grantees, and many other states, understand that technical assistance, incentives and practice tools aligned with the Protective Factors Framework are all critical in supporting those shifts in practice. RTT-ELC grantee states are integrating Strengthening Families through policy and systems change strategies, including: providing funding and technical assistance directly to individual programs; incorporating the approach into Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) standards; and using it in continuous quality improvement processes.

### *Targeting direct support to programs serving children with high needs<sup>2</sup>*

Six of the RTT-ELC states offer Strengthening Families grants or resources to eligible individual early care and education programs. In some cases, these are competitive opportunities for programs across the state. In others, all programs and providers that operate in specific high-need communities receive support (e.g., Promise Neighborhoods sites or Achievement Zones).

**Georgia** is providing Strengthening Families training to residents and professionals in the Atlanta Promise Neighborhoods. Under RTT-ELC, Georgia also designated large ECE centers in selected Early Education Empowerment Zones to implement Great Start Georgia (GSG), the state's maternal and early childhood system for expectant parents, children birth to age five and their families. GSG includes home visiting as a major service delivery strategy for participating families. Home visitors will be trained on Strengthening Families (among other topics). Through RTT-ELC, **Kentucky's** Community Early Childhood Councils will use the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework to map assets and resources and deliver support to families through early learning and development centers. In **Pennsylvania**, RTT-ELC funds will expand the state's Family Engagement Project to Early Care and Education Community Innovation Zones. The project promotes practices that align to Head Start, Strengthening Families and PTA National Standards. Pennsylvania will develop a self-assessment based on the family engagement elements and deliver technical assistance and coaching to participating programs. Through RTT-ELC, **Vermont** will recruit communities with large numbers of children with high

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<sup>2</sup> The RTT-ELC Executive Summary defines Children with High Needs to mean children from birth through kindergarten entry who are from low-income families or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, including children who have disabilities or developmental delays; who are English learners; who reside on "Indian lands" as that term is defined by section 8013(7) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended (ESEA); who are migrant, homeless, or in foster care; and other children as identified by the State.

needs to apply to become Promise Communities. Promise Communities will receive training and support in use of the Strengthening Families Framework. Vermont will use \$5 million of its grant to increase the number of Early Learning and Development Programs (ELDPs) in their Strengthening Families Approach Learning Community. “Hub and spoke” grants will be provided to Strengthening Families Centers to provide comprehensive services and supports to high quality registered Family Child Care Programs (FCCP) that serve concentrated populations of high needs children. By 2017, Vermont wants 100% of licensed early learning and development programs and 95% of registered FCCP serving a concentrated population of families participating in the Child Care Financial Assistance Program to use the Strengthening Families Framework to build protective factors in families they serve. **New Jersey** trains their child care resource and referral agencies, which in turn train providers that elect to participate in Strengthening Families. The providers are trained using the curriculum developed by the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC). They use the self-assessment tool and are provided a \$400 mini-grant to develop a work plan to engage families based around the results of the self-assessment.

### *Incorporating Strengthening Families into QRIS Program Standards*

Ten states have intentionally used Strengthening Families to inform their QRIS standards for parent and family engagement and other quality areas. Some states are aligning their standards with multiple nationally recognized frameworks such as Strengthening Families and the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework.

In **Vermont**, Strengthening Families-informed standards are embedded at each level of the Families and Communities Standards in the QRIS. Programs can use the Strengthening Families Program Self-Assessment at the highest level. The emergent QRIS in **Colorado**, **Kentucky** and **New Jersey** include standards that align to Strengthening Families. **Michigan's** RTT-ELC activities include reviewing and revising the QRIS standards to ensure alignment with Strengthening Families. In **Minnesota**, RTT-ELC funds supported revision of Minnesota's QRIS standards. Six of the QRIS indicators were included in part because they incorporate practices that align to the Strengthening Families approach. Minnesota's QRIS includes other indicators that also support programs' incorporation of the Strengthening Families strategies, but have a basis that is broader than Strengthening Families, including training on Minnesota's early learning standards and child development, and providing assessment results to families. **Wisconsin**, **Georgia** and **Pennsylvania** are revising their QRIS standards to align with Strengthening Families and the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework. Pennsylvania conducted a cross-walk of these two frameworks and the Parent-Teacher Association standards, which identified seven common elements among them. Pennsylvania's quality rating and improvement system, KEYSTONE STARS, was updated to incorporate Strengthening Families language in worksheets and best practice guides.

### *Using the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment to Support Continuous Quality Improvement in a QRIS*

In eight states, programs participating in the QRIS can or must use the Strengthening Families program self-assessment tool to earn points and/or meet the criteria to achieve a higher rating/quality level.

In **New Jersey**, all programs in the QRIS will be required to take the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment. **Kentucky's** QRIS will include requirements for programs to use the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment and develop quality improvement plans. At higher rating levels, programs will demonstrate their efforts to build protective factors. **Colorado's** emergent QRIS includes family engagement as a quality element. Programs can earn three points by completing

the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment, using results to inform the development of a quality improvement plan, implementing a Strengthening Families action plan and annually monitoring progress. In the state of **Washington**, to move beyond level two, programs can earn one point each for completing a modified Strengthening Families Self-Assessment (which includes an additional section titled “Health Literacy”), using results to develop an action plan and providing evidence of continuous feedback and improvement. **Minnesota’s** revised QRIS offers programs a chance to earn a point that will help them achieve three or four stars in the QRIS if all lead teachers or the lead provider have completed a training titled Creating Cultural Connections training which includes an assignment to complete the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment. **California** is using RTT-ELC to support 17 Regional Leadership Consortia to pilot a common “Quality Continuum Framework” (QCF). Consortia members have agreed to integrate a subset of common standards within their locally-designed QRIS. The QCF includes a family engagement element, the goal of which is that “Families receive family-centered, intentional supports framed by the Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors to promote family resilience and optimal development of their children.” Participating programs are required to use the framework for training and TA resources to strengthen parent/provider relationships. One tool they may use is the Strengthening Families Program Self-Assessment tool.

## Ensure Accountability

The RTT-ELC grant competition included a focus on state efforts to validate whether QRIS tiers accurately reflect differential levels of program quality. Because Strengthening Families is an approach, not a model, RTT-ELC offered an opportunities for states to study the link between shifts in practice and results for children and families. Four RTT-ELC states are including measures related to Strengthening Families in their efforts to evaluate and validate their QRIS.

**Minnesota** will use parent interviews to explore research questions regarding parent recognition of QRIS ratings and parent perceptions of quality of rated programs. **Georgia’s** QRIS validation study will include qualitative interviews and surveys with families. Family information will be used to measure the relationship between the quality criteria and child outcomes. **Vermont** will contract with an evaluator to determine the impact of Strengthening Families grantees on family strengths and child outcomes Two questions of interest that Vermont stakeholders identified as relevant to the state’s QRIS validation study are, “Are families impacted differentially by program quality? Do families of children with high needs in ELDP with high ratings report more significant levels of family engagement than those with children in ELDP with lower ratings or no ratings?”

## Conclusion

The RTT-ELC grant competition offered states an unprecedented opportunity to use Strengthening Families to inform critical changes to early childhood policies, systems and quality improvement infrastructure. Successive opportunities, such as the federal Preschool Development Grants competition, similarly include a focus on helping families build protective factors, supporting parents as decision-makers and building their capacity to support their children’s development. With such federal attention to the role of parents, states can continue to look for opportunities to use the Strengthening Families approach as a vehicle for achieving good outcomes for children and families.