

---

# Georgia’s Early Education Empowerment Zones

## Great Start Georgia Implementation

Prepared by: Nnenna Ogbu

### OVERVIEW

---

In September 2014, Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) announced four sites selected to become the first Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RT3-ELC) grant Early Education Empowerment Zones (E3Zs). The priorities of the RT3-ELC grant help states build a stronger and more efficient system of early learning and development. Like many of Georgia’s RT3-ELC projects, the E3Zs encompass the priorities of the grant by using the core areas and focused investment areas as an outline for design and implementation.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key strategies of the E3Z initiative is implementing a Great Start Georgia (GSG) home visitation model inside of a high-quality child care program. To this end, each E3Z partnered with at least one child care center to house a

### REPORT CONTENTS

---

Overview .....	1
Great Start Georgia and the E3Zs .....	2
Broad Challenges and Unique Innovations .....	4
Identifying a “High-Quality Child Care Program” .....	4
Challenge/Innovation 1: Eligibility criteria .....	4
Challenge/Innovation 2: Space for the FSC .....	5
Challenge/Innovation 3: Accessing high needs families .....	5
Challenge/Innovation 4: Gauging success .....	6
Finding the Right People and Center .....	6
Challenge/Innovation 5: Staff turnover .....	6
Challenge/Innovation 6: Finding the right FSC .....	7
Challenge/Innovation 7: The hub layout .....	7
Challenge/Innovation 8: Special populations .....	8
Reaching More Families .....	8
Challenge/Innovation 9: Limited number of families ... ..	8
Challenge/Innovation 10: Reaching high needs families .....	9
Conclusion .....	9

---

<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the RT3-ELC grant, please refer to the executive summary (2013) <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/2013-executive-summary.doc>.

First Steps Resource Coordinator who helps identify children and families who are eligible for home visitation services, as well as connect all families to local resources.

The purpose of this report is to detail some of the activities happening within each hub site. It provides a brief overview of the GSG initiative in the E3Zs, some of the common implementation challenges faced by the hub sites, and the unique innovations in response to the challenges.<sup>2</sup>

### GREAT START GEORGIA AND THE E3Zs

Great Start Georgia (GSG) is Georgia’s Maternal and Early Childhood System, sponsored by the Georgia Department of Public Health. GSG operates the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, which prioritizes evidence-based home visiting (EBHV) models with proven outcomes. As part of Georgia’s RT3-ELC grant projects in the E3Zs, GSG is implementing one new or expanded EBHV program that is based inside of a child care center.

Grounding an EBHV program inside of a child care center is a new approach. For this strategy, only two EBHV programs were chosen for implementation within the E3Zs: Healthy Families Georgia and Parents as Teachers. Healthy Families Georgia is a home visiting model designed to improve childhood outcomes and increase family self-sufficiency by empowering parents through education and community support. Once enrolled in Healthy Families Georgia, families typically receive a one-hour, weekly, in-home visit for up to six months. After the initial six months, the frequency of the home visits is based on families’ needs and progress over time. Parents as Teachers is a home visiting model designed to help all parents improve their parenting skills by fostering positive parent-child interactions, supporting their child’s development, and promoting family well-being. PAT sites provide at least two years of services to families with young children.

Both Healthy Families Georgia and Parents as Teachers are designed to serve families with children from prenatal stages through age five.

*Table 1: Great Start Georgia Model Standards for Services<sup>3</sup>*

<b>Program</b>	<b>Point of Entry</b>	<b>Duration of Service</b>	<b>Intensity of Service</b>
<b>Healthy Families Georgia</b>	Pregnancy – child 2 weeks/ 3 months	Pregnancy – 5 years	1 visit/ week – 1 visit/ quarter
<b>Parents as Teachers</b>	Pregnancy – child 3 years	Pregnancy – 5 years	1 visit/ 2 weeks

Note: Adapted from the Great Start Georgia model standards of services

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed description of Georgia’s RT3-ELC grant E3Z initiative please see the E3Z Education Update on the GOSA website: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/building-quality-contextual-profile-georgias-early-education-empowerment-zones>.

<sup>3</sup> See the Great Start Georgia website for more information on each program: <https://www.greatstartgeorgia.org/home-visiting-resource-center/evidence-based-models-ga>.

To implement the programs, each child care center houses a First Steps Resource Coordinator (FSC) whose job is to identify, recruit, and screen children and families— some of whom attend and do not attend the child care center—and connect them to available resources. Both EBHV models utilize home visitors to deliver services; however, since the delivery of home visiting services remains largely unchanged in the E3Z initiative, the perspective of home visitors is not captured in this report.

The FSC is central to GSG’s vision for how “communities will provide a welcome to every child, make available natural supports for all expectant families, children birth to five, and their families, provide basic parenting information and resources, and link families with more intensive services when needed.”<sup>4</sup> The FSC works in tandem with the director of the child care center and the hub site’s fiscal agent. As owner of the child care center, each director agreed to open up her child care center to the initiative and house the FSC. The fiscal agent is the organization responsible for handling the administrative tasks of the GSG grant. Tasks include formalizing the grant paperwork; ensuring compliance with grant-specific regulations; monitoring the budget; submitting progress reports; and, among other things, staffing the FSC, program manager/supervisor, and home visitors needed to execute the EBHV program.

GOSA interviewed the FSC, child care center director, and fiscal agent in each of the hub sites for this report. They were asked about their role in implementing the initiative, the supports and resources that they receive and still need, the families and early childhood professionals that they serve, and their personal experiences with the implementation thus far. Most of the participants have been involved with the initiative since rollout, which began in January 2015, when GSG administrators identified and approached the child care centers and fiscal agents about participation. The E3Z hub sites started delivering GSG services between July 1, 2015, and October 1, 2015 and will continue to deliver services until at least December 2018 when the RT3-ELC grant funding period ends.

---

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Great Start Georgia and the programs they offer, please visit their website: <https://www.greatstartgeorgia.org/home>.

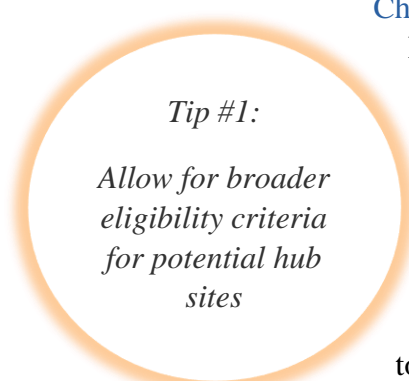
## BROAD CHALLENGES AND UNIQUE INNOVATIONS

---

This section focuses on the broad challenges faced in each zone during the GSG hub model implementation, and the responses to those challenges. The challenges vary between hub sites because the sites, like the zones they are located within and the communities that they serve, are not identical. Likewise, the hubs' responses to each challenge are also unique, finding ways to work within their resources to re-envision the logistics of the site and strive towards successful implementation.

### IDENTIFYING A “HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE PROGRAM”

As part of its RT3-ELC grant application, Georgia committed to expanding Great Start Georgia by “creating home visiting and family engagement hubs in three-star [Quality Rated] child care centers in each E3Z.”<sup>5</sup> A couple of factors limited the scope of this grant commitment.



#### Challenge/Innovation 1: Eligibility criteria

First, GSG defines its communities served by county, not by region or zone. Therefore, GSG administrators had to choose one county within each E3Z to target for service delivery. Because the Clarke E3Z and Bibb E3Z only include one county each, GSG can deliver services to the whole zone. However, for the multi-county zones, E3Z North and South Georgia E3Z, GSG administrators had to choose only one county for service delivery within each zone. Ultimately, the GSG initiative decided to deliver services within Bibb, Clarke, Gordon (E3Z North), and Lowndes (South Georgia E3Z) Counties.

Second, the pool of eligible and willing high-quality child care centers was small. During initial implementation, when GSG administrators contacted eligible child care programs about serving as hub sites, very few three-star Quality Rated child care centers were available and willing to serve as hub sites in the zones. Instead, GSG administrators secured participation from one- and two-star rated centers and one center in the process of becoming rated to serve as hub sites and house the FSCs.

---

<sup>5</sup> Quality Rated is Georgia's system to determine, improve, and communicate the quality of programs that provide child care. For more information on Quality Rated, please see the DECAL Quality Rated website: <http://families.decal.ga.gov/ChildCare/QualityRated>.

*Tip #2:*

*Ensure that the FSC has some sort of dedicated space, even if the space is outside of the hub*

**Challenge/Innovation 2: Space for the FSC**

The program’s intent was for the hub site to house the FSC by providing space for the FSC to carry out necessary job functions. The FSC is responsible for community outreach, intake screening, developmental screening, service coordination, family engagement activities, and staff/teacher development. In many cases, this meant that the FSC would need office space to create and store materials, private space to talk with families, and group space to hold events for family engagement and/or professional development for the center’s staff.

Each hub center has not been able to accommodate fully the FSC within the center walls, but the centers, fiscal agents, and FSCs have all worked together to support the hub site and the FSC. For example, Clarke County’s hub center did not have any physical space available to house the FSC. The FSC and the fiscal agent looked into renting space within a nearby fire station, but that was not feasible for cost and safety reasons (e.g., children and families would need to cross a busy street). They also considered renting space within a nearby elementary school, but that was not feasible for cost and logistical reasons (e.g., the path between the child care center and the elementary school is not walkable). Instead, the FSC creates and stores her resource materials at the fiscal agent’s office. The FSC then spends time in the hub center sharing office space with the staff, meets with families in their homes, offers family engagement activities at the hub and in the community, and provides professional development opportunities to center staff after normal work hours.

*Tip #3:*

*Present GSG resources as beneficial to all families, especially those with high needs*

**Challenge/Innovation 3: Accessing high needs families**

Participants were asked to describe the characteristics of a “successful hub site.” In each zone, participants expressed a need for the screening process to be incorporated into the hub center’s business practices. In Lowndes County, the hub center has incorporated a brief checklist into the enrollment packets for new families. The checklist is used as a pre-screener to identify families who may be eligible for GSG services, though resources are provided to all families. The next step for the hub and FSC is to allow the FSC to complete in-person screenings with new families by instructing families to allot more in-person time (currently 30-45 minutes) to the enrollment process. In Gordon County, the FSC was able to include GSG information and a consent to release information in the center’s enrollment packet. This came about when the FSC offered to re-create digital versions of the center’s enrollment packet, materials which were previously only available as hard copies. Other FSCs, fiscal agents, and hub center directors across the E3Zs are working towards the same goal and identified the hub’s full commitment as being paramount towards success.

#### Challenge/Innovation 4: Gauging success

Each of the hub centers is intricately involved in and benefiting from the E3Z initiative by participating in more than just the GSG hub initiative. Most of the hub center directors attend their zone's regularly scheduled Birth-to-Eight team meetings and are part of their zone's Director's Network or their region's Quality Rated Peer Support Network.<sup>6,7</sup> Three of the original hub centers have also received Child Care Expansion Grants, totaling more than \$192,000.<sup>8</sup> The Bibb County hub center also received a Family Engagement Opportunity Grant, which it used to inform parents and families about healthy childhood development and to teach useful skills to reinforce at home.<sup>9</sup>

#### Tip #4:

*Look for centers that are community-centered and capable of taking advantage of other resources*

### FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE AND CENTER

Every participant stressed the need for finding the right people and the right center to implement the GSG hub model. In terms of people, everyone who is part of the initiative must be fully committed to the big picture: helping all children and families. In terms of centers, the hub center needs to be not only committed to the big picture, but also serve the target population of children and families in need and have the infrastructure to support the FSC and various events.

#### Tip #5:

*Ensure that the hub and the FSC work well together*

#### Challenge/Innovation 5: Staff turnover

One common challenge for all of the hub sites is finding the right people, especially since the hub initiative encapsulates new work and working environments for the hub center and staff, the FSC, and GSG. For an initiative where on-the-ground and most crucial participants include less than a handful of individuals—the FSC, program supervisor, fiscal agent representative, and center director—turnover can quickly stall an otherwise successful implementation.

Two of the hub sites experienced turnover in the FSC role. In Clarke County, very early on, the original FSC was replaced with the current FSC about three months after service delivery started. Part of the reason for the departure of the original FSC was the lack of rapport between the FSC

---

<sup>6</sup> To read more about how the Director's in the E3Zs, please see GOSA's September 2016 E3Z evaluation report: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/sites/gosa.georgia.gov/files/GOSA%20E3Z%20Report%202016-09-14%20FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> To learn more about the Quality Rated Peer Support Network, please see the Quality Rated Program Manual: [https://qualityrated.decal.ga.gov/Content/Documents/PM\\_ProgramManual.pdf](https://qualityrated.decal.ga.gov/Content/Documents/PM_ProgramManual.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> To find out more about the E3Z Child Care Expansion Grant and grantees, please visit the DECAL website: [http://decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/release\\_childcareexpansiongrants12-5-16.pdf](http://decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/release_childcareexpansiongrants12-5-16.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> To read more about DECAL's Family Engagement Opportunity Grants, please see the DECAL press release: <http://decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/familyengagementopportunitygrantpressrelease.pdf>.

and the center hub. The fractured relationship deterred successful implementation. When the current FSC came on board, she needed to rebuild the relationship with the center hub and allay any previously held apprehensions about the hub initiative. In Lowndes County, the original FSC was replaced with the current FSC about 15 months after the hub site began delivering services. In this case, the current FSC already had a very good working relationship with the hub center and was very familiar with the hub site from being a parent educator. The transition was seamless, and the hub center director, FSC, and fiscal agent are all very satisfied with the change.

*Tip #6:*

*Look for FSCs that work well with teachers, parents, and children*

**Challenge/Innovation 6: Finding the right FSC**

One characteristic that all current FSCs have in common is that they have prior experience working with small children.

Though the FSCs duties mostly involve working with adults, they must also be able to work with small children.

The hub center is filled with small children, most of which are under the age of five. The FSC's ability to care for and engage with small children, as well as her ability to work with adults, is what helps her to become part of the hub center—helping teachers when a child is disinterested, offering

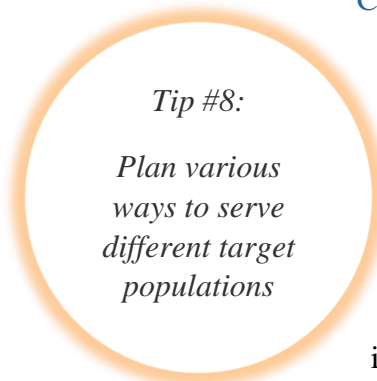
lesson suggestions to help teachers plan, and simultaneously dialoguing with parents and their children.

**Challenge/Innovation 7: The hub layout**

Finding the right hub center is a bit more nuanced. Though each hub center is committed to helping children and families, they each also have their own set of advantages and disadvantages. The Gordon County hub center's facility layout allows the FSC to remain present and fully visible in the entryway as families come in and out of the building. The FSC likes this layout because it gives parents an opportunity to see her. She is also able to see and help teachers when they need it—reading to classes or helping with special events—which has made her feel more a part of the center itself and not an outsider. She also has shared space within the center and dedicated space within the fiscal agent's office to talk to parents. The intake screening questionnaire contains some personal questions (e.g., do you smoke) that people are unwilling to answer in an open area. The Bibb County FSC has a different problem with the hub center layout in that parents do not want to be seen “going to the back” where her office is located. For her, she offers to meet parents at a place and time that is most convenient for them, including a local fast food restaurant, a coffee shop, or in their homes.

*Tip #7:*

*Leverage the hub center's layout by finding private spaces, group spaces, and spaces for the FSC to be seen*



*Tip #8:  
Plan various  
ways to serve  
different target  
populations*

### Challenge/Innovation 8: Special populations

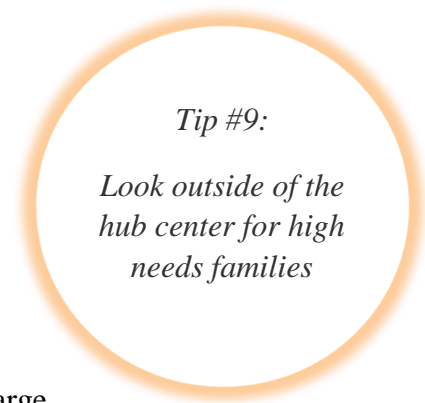
Clarke County has three child care centers that serve as hub sites, and the FSC rotates time in each of them. One of the hub centers serves a large population of high needs families because it is located near a homeless shelter. The foray into the homeless sector is new for the fiscal agent; however, one of the pitfalls of this location is that the families and children do not stay in the center for very long because their housing is temporary. Once those families leave the center, it is very hard to keep track of and in contact with them. Another of Clarke County's hub centers also serves a large population of high needs families but those families are much less transient. This hub center's facility has space to host large family engagement or professional development events as well as private meeting space for the FSC to talk to families, which allows the FSC to remain connected to the families she engages. In terms of GSG, the hub model works best when the child care center provides access to high needs families; however, the effectiveness of the GSG EBHV program models increases the longer that parents and families continue to receive services.

### REACHING MORE FAMILIES

The third common challenge among GSG hub sites is the struggle to meet the requisite numbers for the program models. Many of the parents who need child care are employed or looking for employment. This means that the parents might earn above the GSG program model's income requirements, or that the parents do not have time to meet with home visitors. Both of these circumstances are reasons why parents can become ineligible for GSG services.

### Challenge/Innovation 9: Limited number of families

All of the FSCs and fiscal agents came to the same conclusion about meeting their programmatic numbers: the numbers cannot be met within the hub center—they must look for families and get referrals from outside of the child care center. On average, it took about six months before the FSCs started branching outside of the hub center to get referrals and connect with families. Initially, they were unsure if they were supposed to work outside of the hub center; but, in hindsight, they all agree that it was the best decision for their efficiency. Even in hub centers that serve a large number of high needs families, the hub center does not enroll enough families to fill the hub site's program capacity, which means that the FSC will eventually need to branch outside of the hub center.



*Tip #9:  
Look outside of the  
hub center for high  
needs families*

One challenge is that working families lack available time to engage with the FSC or participate in family engagement activities because of work schedules, school schedules, student activities, and other responsibilities.



*Tip #10:*

*Plan for the FSC to travel to where high needs families are present*

**Challenge/Innovation 10: Reaching high needs families**

To increase efficiency and bolster their GSG programmatic caseloads, FSCs spend some of their working hours or work days in other service areas, such as the local hospital or health department or WIC office, to find and reach more eligible families. By spending time in other sites, getting to know workers in the other service areas, the FSCs have been able to secure more referrals as a result of the relationship-building. Time outside of the hub center also directly exposes the FSC to more families. Gordon County's FSC recounted time she spent in the local health department when she was able to help a mom engage with her active toddler. The interaction allowed the FSC to model behavior for the mom and give the mom other resources that she can use to help guide her toddler's development. Clarke County's FSC likes to organize family engagement events in the evenings or on the weekends because she gets the most amount of time at these events to talk to families and build relationships.

---

## CONCLUSION

The challenges of identifying “high-quality child care programs,” finding the right center and the right people, and reaching more families represent a sample of challenges faced throughout the implementation of the GSG hub model initiative. The individuals at each GSG hub site worked together to innovate around these challenges by:

- Being flexible about which centers could be a hub site,
- Rethinking what it means to house an FSC,
- Exploring different work settings and work schedules,
- Incorporating the GSG resources and FSC more fully into the child care center,
- Finding people who are committed to helping children and families (and able to engage both children and parents), and
- Being both communicative when implementation was not following as planned and willing to try other approaches to get back on track to meeting the programmatic goals.

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to offer advice to other child care centers, organizations, or people that are interested in implementing a GSG hub site. Hub center directors urged other child care centers to be open-minded, flexible and communicative. This type of commitment is something that the center's leadership must want for their kids because it is a *giving* relationship, not a receiving relationship. Fiscal agents encouraged other fiscal agents to get to know the grant details, ask a lot of questions, and provide clear, upfront expectations. A key to hiring the right people is knowing the hub center well and having a good relationship with staff. Current FSCs encouraged other FSCs to become part of the hub center by getting to know the center's staff and building relationships with all of the teachers and students. FSCs should also be flexible with families and the hub center, and be prepared to work non-traditional hours. FSCs urged other FSCs to be positive, and network with other nearby FSCs.

All of the GSG hub sites are operating near full capacity and continue to reach more families within their communities. The E3Z grant funding, along with the GSG hub site funding, is set to end December 2018, and all of the hub sites are working to secure funding to ensure their sustainability.

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement would like to thank the Georgia Department of Public Health, the E3Z Community Coordinators, the E3Z First Steps Resource Coordinators, and the Great Start Georgia administrators, hub site fiscal agents, and child care center directors who are working to implement the GSG hub grant in the E3Zs. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement would also like to thank the following individuals and organizations who provided the data contained in this report:

- *Suzanne Harbin, E3Z North Community Coordinator*
- *Clayton Adams, Clarke E3Z Community Coordinator*
- *Valerie Blackmon, Bibb E3Z Community Coordinator*
- *Jill O'Meara, South Georgia E3Z Community Coordinator*
- *The Lowndes/Valdosta Commission for Children & Youth, Inc.*
- *Bright Start Preschool Learning Center*
- *Prevent Child Abuse Athens*
- *Little Angels Daycare*
- *Bright Beginnings Preschool of Athens*
- *United Way of Central Georgia*
- *Sandy's Sandbox*
- *Family Resource Center of Gordon County*
- *Brighter Tomorrow's Child Development Center*