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# Georgia’s Early Education Empowerment Zones, Evaluation Report

## January 2017 – June 2017 Implementation

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### OVERVIEW

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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 zones each include one to five counties pre-identified into clusters by DECAL. The zones are in North Georgia (Catoosa, Whitfield, Murray, Gordon, and Gilmer counties), Clarke County, Bibb County, and South Georgia (Colquitt, Cook, Brooks, Lowndes, and Echols counties).<sup>1</sup>

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>2</sup> The purpose of the E3Zs is to increase the availability of high-quality early learning and development options and integrate new or expanded services into high-quality child care programs focused on children with high needs, which includes children who are low-income, English learners, and children with disabilities or developmental delays.

The E3Zs include one community coordinator per zone. The Community Coordinator’s role is to facilitate and promote community-based

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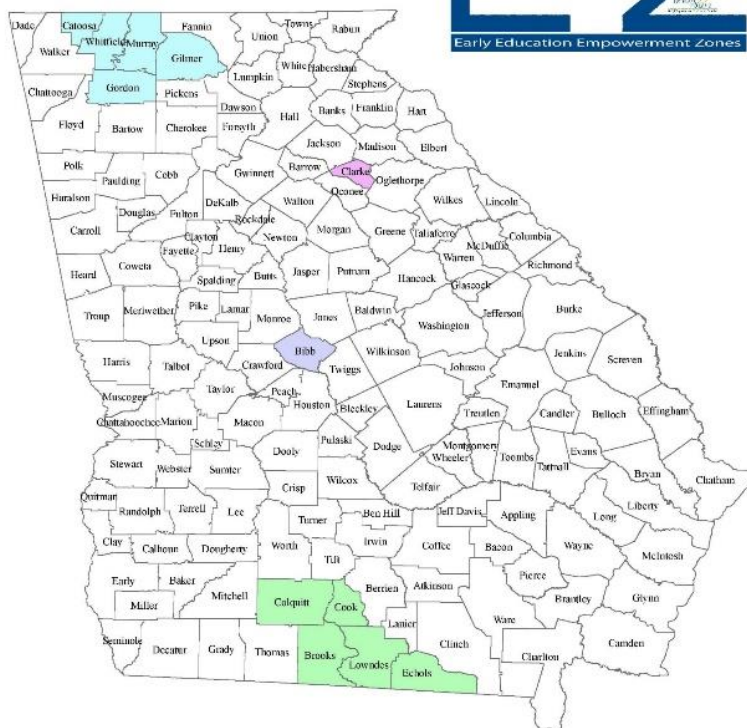
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<sup>1</sup> The E3Zs are listed in order of geography, from North Georgia to South Georgia. The counties within the E3Z North and South Georgia E3Z are presented in geographic order from west to east.

<sup>2</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>.

projects and programs related to the implementation of the E3Zs. The Community Coordinators work directly with DECAL and state administrators to coordinate services for their zones, pilot new initiatives, and share information. The Community Coordinators provide most of the information for this report. Their testimonies supply much needed and sometimes nuanced local rationale for a community's response to its own perceived need.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this report is to summarize the recent RT3-ELC grant activities (from January through June 2017) in the E3Zs, communicate the details of implementation, and identify the key practices needed to sustain the E3Z work. This report provides a brief overview of Georgia's RT3-ELC grant strategies within the E3Zs, details major accomplishments and challenges within the E3Zs, and then concludes with next steps planned within the zones.<sup>4</sup>



## GEORGIA'S RT3-ELC STRATEGIES

As part of its RT3-ELC proposal, DECAL is targeting specific strategies to increase the quality of and access to early learning and development options, especially for children with high needs (which includes children who are low-income, English learners, and children with disabilities or developmental delays). In addition, the E3Zs support local efforts to coordinate key programs and services that target children and families with high needs. The strategies include:

1. Supporting local Birth-to-Eight Teams
2. Expanding Quality Rated participation and access
3. Implementing the Great Start Georgia home visitation model in high-quality child care programs

<sup>3</sup> Previous E3Z reports can be found on the GOSA website: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/race-top-early-learning-challenge-grant-evaluation>

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed description of each RT3-ELC grant E3Z strategy or detailed profiles of each of the E3Zs, please see the previous E3Z reports on the GOSA website: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/race-top-early-learning-challenge-grant-evaluation>.

4. Enhancing professional development opportunities for early childhood workers
5. Decreasing family co-pays in high-quality child care programs
6. Increasing the availability of high-quality child care programs by using economic incentives for new businesses
7. Increasing subsidy rates in high-quality child care programs
8. Offering Summer Transition Programs in high-quality child care programs
9. Instituting comprehensive assessments and screenings
10. Offering targeted grants to increase family engagement

### REVIEW OF E3Z ACTIVITY BETWEEN JANUARY 2017 AND JUNE 2017

During the past six months, the E3Zs continue to build upon the work that they started two years ago. The Birth-to-Eight Teams are instrumental in bridging effective, sustainable partnerships that lead to successful innovations and national recognition. Each zone has held or will soon hold an Early Education Summit focused on their community. The Community Coordinators helped their local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies design and implement their annual \$25,000 mini-grants to child care providers. These mini-grants proved useful in incentivizing provider participation in other E3Z initiatives like the Birth-to-Eight team or the Directors' Network. The zones are also working to encourage more participation from all providers—from public school Pre-K programs to family child care providers—in community initiatives.

In the next six months, the E3Zs expect to see an increase in the number of providers joining the Quality Rated program and its Peer Support Network. In December 2016, DECAL adopted a policy that ties providers' Child Care and Parent Services (CAPS) subsidy payment eligibility to the provider's Quality Rated status. Only star rated providers will be eligible to receive CAPS payments after December 31, 2020. Considering that the Quality Rated technical assistance model estimates six to nine months of preparation before a program is ready to be rated, the E3Zs, and especially the CCR&Rs, are working diligently to help providers get started on the path to Quality Rated.

## RECENT E3Z ACTIVITIES

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This section focuses on the recent activities within the E3Zs. Through local partnerships, the zones are working to meet the RT3-ELC grant objectives, as well as spark new, local initiatives aimed at reaching the common goal of an improved early care and education system.

### MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

At the end of 2016, each E3Z was planning its own Early Education Summit, modeled after the South Georgia E3Z's Early Education summit that took place in August 2016. Each Community Coordinator was also working the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency to design the annual \$25,000 mini grants that CCR&Rs offer to child care providers. In addition to hosting Early Education Summits and implementing the CCR&R mini-grants, the E3Zs and Community Coordinators implemented local initiatives and planned for summertime community engagement activities. Two communities within the zones, Whitfield County in E3Z North and Colquitt County in the South Georgia E3Z, were nationally recognized as Pacesetter communities by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

#### Mini-Grants, Summits, and Professional Recognition

Child care providers were awarded CCR&R mini-grants during the first six months of 2017. The mini-grants are professional development and resource packages for child care providers. Most of the zones leveraged the mini-grant funds to incentivize provider engagement in ongoing professional development initiatives, such as the Directors' Network professional learning meetings. The local CCR&R guides the Directors' Network by outlining learning needs and offering specialized professional development. However, child care providers are not required to participate in their local Director's Network, and at the end of 2016, provider participation in the Directors' Networks plateaued. This stalled participation is one of the main reasons that the Community Coordinators worked with their local CCR&Rs to design the mini-grants and incentivize provider engagement. The partnership has increased participation. For example, in the E3Z North, several new providers now attend the Directors' Network meetings; these newest providers are also recipients of a CCR&R mini-grant.

The E3Zs have been successful in planning and executing summits—large-scale, community-wide events centered around one theme related to children ages birth through eight. In August 2016, the South Georgia E3Z hosted a summit focused on literacy. In April 2017, the Bibb E3Z held its second annual Baby & Toddler Expo, which is designed to increase awareness in the Macon-Bibb community around early learning strategies, disabilities, community resources, family engagement activities, and literacy initiatives. Fourteen community vendors supported the event, which featured information booths, games, family activities, and prizes and surprises for everyone in attendance.

In May 2017, the Clarke E3Z hosted its summit, "Awareness to Action: Community Summit on Trauma and Toxic Stress," which focused on childhood trauma and toxic stress. Over 200 participants attended the two-day event, including the other three Community Coordinators and some of their community stakeholders. Family Connections-Communities in Schools, in

partnership with the University of Georgia, DECAL, and other organizations spearheaded the two-day event. By the end of the summit, the Trauma Informed Athens Steering Committee charted a course for how to make Athens a Trauma Informed Community.<sup>5</sup>

The zones' successes have also garnered national and state recognition. Communities in both the E3Z North (Whitfield County) and South Georgia E3Z (Colquitt County) were among 48 communities nationwide to receive the Annual Pacesetter Honor, bestowed by The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading in March 2017. Whitfield County was recognized for its strategic use of proven and promising strategies in early childhood language and literacy, as well as its prioritization of strategies for vulnerable children. Whitfield County's strategies include learning academies, book blasts, power lunches, and Ready Rosie. Colquitt County was recognized for its efforts to support parent success through the scale up of *Talk With Me Baby*—an initiative aimed at improving language nutrition for newborns.<sup>6</sup>

All four of the E3Z Community Coordinators and their zones came together to participate in the first annual Governor's Summit on Early Language and Literacy in June 2017. The two-day event followed the official opening of the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy at Georgia College. During the inaugural summit, the E3Z North Community Coordinator served as a keynote speaker, and Colquitt County (South Georgia E3Z) hosted a breakout session to inspire other communities.

#### Local Initiatives and PLC Certification

Throughout the year, the zones continue to plan and implement local initiatives to meet the needs of their specific communities. For example, the Bibb E3Z community experiences high rates of pedestrian accidents, many of which involve children walking to and from school. With this in mind, the Bibb E3Z Birth-to-Eight team partnered with the Middle Georgia Regional Commission to host the central Georgia Safe Routes to School Palooza, one of three such paloozas in the state. Georgia's Safe Routes to School aims to encourage more kids to walk and bike to school. The group coordinates with local partners, such as the Bibb E3Z and Middle Georgia Regional Commission, to identify and develop transportation options for kids and parents within a 2-mile radius of elementary and middle schools. These options include engineering safer environments for walking and biking, encouraging kids and parents to walk and bike, educating communities on how to engage in safe pedestrian activities, evaluating changes to walking and biking habits among kids, and providing enforcement cues to drivers, walkers and bicyclists as they travel together on the road.

The Birth-to-Eight teams bolster collaboration and networking by bringing community partners together. In the E3Z North, for example, the Birth-to-Eight team helped to improve the local Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) meal sites in Dalton, GA. The SFSP is a USDA-funded

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<sup>5</sup> For more information about Trauma Informed Communities, please see the the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (SAMHSA) national newsletter here: <https://newsletter.samhsa.gov/2017/05/16/trauma-informed-communities/>.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the 2016 Pacesetter communities, please see The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading website: <http://gradelevelreading.net/our-network/pacesetter-honors>.

Child Nutrition Program that provides free, nutritious meals to children during the summer. Three years ago, most of the summer feeding sites were meal-only sites offering bagged lunches to families with children under the age of 18. By summer 2017, Dalton State College teaching candidates ran some of the summer feeding sites as interactive, outdoor learning sites. The teaching candidates provided educational toys for the children and developed age-appropriate lesson plans using the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) kits and resources. The robustness of the summer feeding sites is directly attributable to connections made during the zone's Birth-to-Eight Team meetings.

Each of the Community Coordinators recently received their certification as Professional Learning Communities (PLC) trainers through partnership with the University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning. A PLC is a group of people who come together to share their challenges or concerns about working with young children and their families and learn to improve their practices over time. Participants in the PLC Facilitator training and certification program now offer PLCs as an important aspect of the training and technical assistance offered by Georgia's CCR&Rs to support programs with Quality Rated. The process took two years to complete, and the skills acquired are being used to support the work in the zones. Additionally, the South Georgia E3Z Community Coordinator is also now serving as the E3Z Manager (overseeing the work across all four zones) and will learn how to train new PLC Facilitators alongside UF Lastinger staff during the next PLC cohort.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES

The E3Zs are not without challenges. Over the past six months, the zones have each addressed issues related to provider and family engagement and have sought to keep their Birth-to-Eight teams focused on the group's original mission and goals.

### Provider and Family Engagement

The zones continue to look for creative ways to engage all child care providers within their communities. The Clarke E3Z is working to increase private child care providers' interest in the Birth-to-Eight Team and the Quality Rated program. On the other hand, the South Georgia E3Z is working to reach family child care providers, a provider group that, due to time and distance, is not always able to attend Birth-to-Eight team or Directors' Network meetings. The South Georgia E3Z Community Coordinator started a Family Child Care Network with the hope of engaging more family child care providers. Leading up to the first meeting of the Family Child Care Network, the Community Coordinator personally invited family child care providers to the network by knocking on the doors of 67 licensed family child care providers in the region. The providers that she did not visit, she called on the phone. The group held its first evening meeting in March 2017 with 11 providers and are planning to meet once every six months.

The zones have also worked to increase family engagement in their local initiatives. The Great Start Georgia initiative, in particular, has struggled to find ways to reach working families. The idea of the Great Start Georgia hub model is to co-locate a First Steps Resource Coordinator (FSC) inside of a child care center. The FSC's 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. In practice, however, the FSCs realized that families that frequent a child care center have little free time to stop and talk. The FSCs responded to this challenge by making themselves available not just in the child care center setting but also in community centers such as hospitals and WIC offices.<sup>7</sup>

### Birth-to-Eight Team Reflections

The Birth-to-Eight teams continue to implement varied initiatives throughout their communities. Sometimes, they need to reflect on what they learned and what they are working to accomplish. In February 2017, the Bibb E3Z used time during its monthly Birth-to-Eight team meeting to review the history of the Early Learning Network, the ELC grant, and the E3Z. It was a reminder of how the group started years ago as a Promise Neighborhood and is now part of an E3Z. Their scope has expanded from improving education outcomes of students in two targeted neighborhoods to improving the overall quality of the early care and education system throughout the county.

The South Georgia E3Z also took time in May and June 2017 to reflect on their roles within the group. Each individual on the Birth-to-Eight team considered several prompts:

1. How does your job relate to child and families?
2. How can our communities work together to empower teachers?
3. What does it take to prepare a child for Kindergarten?
4. What does school readiness mean to you?
5. Name some opportunities/challenges that our early childhood education (ECE) students face.

This line of reflective questioning allowed each member of the Birth-to-Eight team to recall how the work that they do as individuals contributes to the group's broad goal of improving the early learning system in their community.

According to the Community Coordinators, the Governor's Inaugural Summit in May 2017 provided a good opportunity for Birth-to-Eight team members to reflect on their work and bring new partners up to speed on their goals. They asked each other:

1. What are our current strengths? What is going well?
2. What are our current challenges?
3. How would you describe your top priorities for the next 1 year? 2 years? 5 years?
4. What do we need to grow – to scale up?

The second and third questions relate directly to sustainability. Actions in response to these two questions will help the Birth-to-Eight teams develop sustainability plans ahead of when ELC grant funding ends in 2018.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information about the implementation of the Great Start Georgia hub model in the E3Zs, please see the Great Start Georgia small study on the GOSA site:  
<https://gosa.georgia.gov/sites/gosa.georgia.gov/files/GOSA%20E3Z%20GSG%20Small%20Study%20Report%20FINAL.PDF>.

## NEXT STEPS & CONCLUSION

### Professional Learning Communities

One of the original goals for the E3Zs was to offer enhanced professional development opportunities for early childhood workers. Three of the E3Zs built Director's Networks, professional learning communities consisting of child care center directors. The zones also offer quarterly meetings for the Quality Rated Peer Support Network.

The Quality Rated Peer Support Network (PSN) exists for child care providers to share ideas, success stories, and lessons learned during the Quality Rated experience. The PSN is open to all Quality Rated programs, as well as those who are in the process of earning or increasing their Quality Rated star rating. Each PSN meeting is facilitated by a Quality Rated Ambassador, a representative from a 2- or 3-star Quality Rated program. In June 2017, DECAL announced its statewide expansion of the PSN to meet quarterly in 18 communities around the state, including within the E3Zs.<sup>8</sup>

### CAPS 2020

In December 2016, the DECAL Advisory Committee adopted the following policy: Quality Rated eligible providers must be star rated by December 31, 2020 to continue to receive Child Care and Parent Services (CAPS) funding.<sup>9</sup> The CAPS program provides subsidized child care for low-income families across Georgia. DECAL recommends that any provider who accepts CAPS but is not yet Quality Rated should begin the rating process as soon as possible to meet the 2020 deadline.

Since July 2015, a Tiered Family Co-Pay program has been available to all CAPS-eligible children within the E3Zs. This means that families who are eligible to receive CAPS and enroll their child in a Quality Rated child care program receive a reduction in their family co-pay amount. The reduction amount depends on the provider's Quality Rated star level, with higher star levels leading to larger reductions. However, there was little incentive for providers to become Quality Rated since Quality Rated was not a requirement for CAPS payments. The new policy changes provider eligibility. As a result, the zones are all expecting to see an increase in the number of providers moving into Quality Rated, especially from providers who want to continue receiving CAPS payments.

Over the past two years, each zone has increased the percentage of CAPS-eligible children served in Quality Rated child care programs (see Figure 1). The increases range from 19 to 30 percentage points between September 2015 and April 2017.

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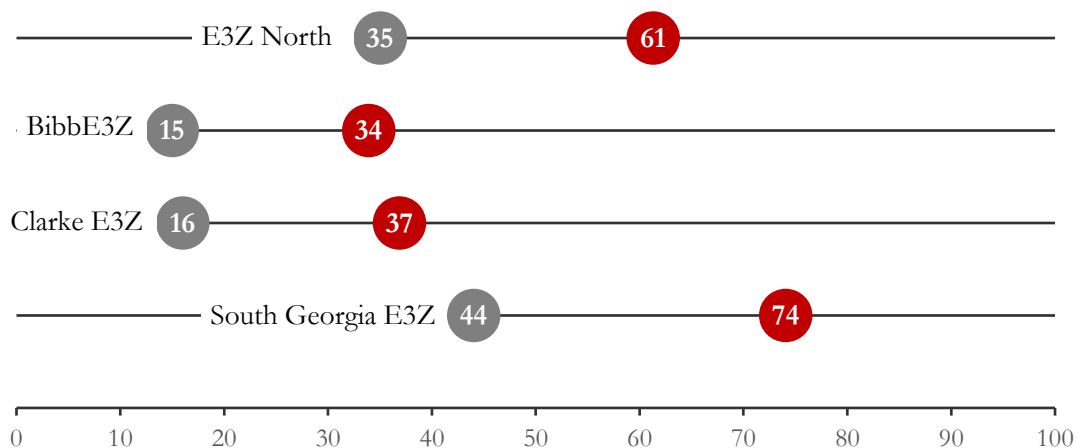
<sup>8</sup> For more information about the PSN, please contact DECAL at [qualityratedpsn@decals.ga.gov](mailto:qualityratedpsn@decals.ga.gov).

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the CAPS and Quality Rated update, please see DECAL Commissioner Amy Jacob's letter in the CCR&R of Central Georgia newsletter: [http://caps.decals.ga.gov/Assets/downloads/WhatsNewinQualityRated\\_5-2-17.pdf](http://caps.decals.ga.gov/Assets/downloads/WhatsNewinQualityRated_5-2-17.pdf).



Figure 1: Percentage of CAPS-Eligible Children Served in Quality Rated Child Care Programs, within the E3Zs.

The percentage of CAPS-eligible children in Quality Rated child care programs increased between 2015 and 2017.



Nearly three years into the zone initiative, most of the E3Z's local initiatives are collaborative events, such as the annual education summits and recurring events like the Directors' Network meetings. As the ELC grant enters its final 18 months, the focus shifts toward sustainability so that these initiatives will continue to be implemented in the zones to improve the quality of the early care and education systems.

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement would like to thank the E3Z Community Coordinators and the state, regional, and local stakeholders who are working to implement the RT3-ELC grant in the E3Zs. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement would also like to thank the following individuals and programs who provided the data contained in this report:

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