
Georgia’s Early Education Empowerment Zones, Evaluation Report July 2016 – December 2016 Implementation

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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.¹

The purpose of this report is to summarize the recent RT3-ELC grant activities (July through December 2016) 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, describes the E3Zs’ form and function, details major accomplishments and challenges within the E3Zs, and then concludes with next steps planned within the zones.²

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¹ 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>.

² 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>.

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), as well as supporting 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
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 July 2016 and December 2016

At this stage of implementation, the E3Zs are each benefiting from the local partnerships that are now in place. These partnerships led to many successes—securing over \$1.1 million in grant funds for economic development, family engagement, and language and literacy development; as well as organizing and delivering customized professional development for early childhood professionals. The zones are also experiencing challenges, mainly in the form of transitions—such as policy changes in how licensing compliance is determined for child care providers and administrative changes in oversight and personnel.

In the next six months, each E3Z is planning its own Early Education Summit, modeled after the South Georgia E3Z Early Education Summit that happened in August 2016. South Georgia's summit focused on literacy, while the other summits will focus on an issue each E3Z identifies as most critical. Each zone is also working with their local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency to design the annual \$25,000 mini grants offered by the CCR&R to child care providers.

Finally, the zones are dealing with the reality of slowing growth in Quality Rated saturation. The number of providers participating and/or rated in Quality Rated is not growing as speedily as before. The zones, and the rest of Georgia, are also embracing the two fronts of quality, initial quality and continuous quality improvement, as they move forward to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early learning and development options.

E3Z FORM AND FUNCTION

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).³ The purpose of the E3Zs is to increase the availability of high-quality early learning and development options and to 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 were designed to include one community coordinator per zone. The role of the community coordinator is to facilitate and promote community-based projects and programs related to the implementation of the E3Zs. The Community Coordinators perform this role under the direction of the E3Z Director, who is instrumental in coordinating services for the zones and coordinators, as well as liaising with other DECAL and state administrators. As a team, the group is able to learn together and take newly shared information back into their individual communities. Information for this report is derived from the Community Coordinators, whose testimonies supply much needed and sometimes nuanced local rationale for a community's response to its own perceived need.⁴

The purpose of this report is to summarize the recent RT3-ELC grant activities (July through December 2016) in the E3Zs, communicate the details of implementation, and identify the key practices needed to sustain the E3Z work.

³ 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.

⁴ Previous E3Z reports can be found on the GOSA website: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/race-top-early-learning-challenge-grant-evaluation>

RECENT E3Z ACTIVITIES

This section focuses on the local partnerships that are working together 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

Recently, the E3Z Community Coordinators and their Birth-to-Eight Teams have been working with local partners to improve their systems of early care and education by securing grants for family engagement, economic development, and language and literacy development.

They have created multi-day community events and programs, as well as provided customized professional development opportunities demanded by and delivered to their zones' early care and education professionals.

Grant Writing Success

During the latter half of 2016, the zones intensified their grant writing efforts to apply for and implement grants from DECAL, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), and the Innovation Fund.

DECAL announced Family Engagement Opportunity Grants in December 2015, and awarded over \$60,000 to five grantees in February 2016.⁵ Four of the five grantees are located in an E3Z, one in each zone.

- In the Clarke E3Z, grant funds were used to involve parents in healthy cooking sessions, first aid and CPR training, and a literacy/back-to-school event.
- In the Bibb E3Z, the grantee—which also happens to be “hub” site for the Great Start Georgia initiative—is using the funding to inform parents and families about healthy childhood development and to teach useful skills to reinforce education at home.⁶
- The grantee in the E3Z North used the funds offer two consecutive 14-week parent skills training series to high-risk families in Gilmer County.
- In the South Georgia E3Z, grant funds were used to offer programs on developmental milestones for preschoolers, to develop literacy in young children, and to promote overall wellness for families.

In partnership with DCA, DECAL offered Child Care Expansion Grants to Quality Rated child care programs throughout most of 2016. The competitive Child Care Expansion Grants were aimed at increasing openings for infants and toddlers and supplied up to \$100,000 to child care

⁵ To read more about DECAL's Family Engagement Opportunity Grants, please see the DECAL press release: <http://dec.al.ga.gov/documents/attachments/familyengageopportunitygrantpressrelease.pdf>

⁶ A “hub” site is a child care center, within an E3Z, that is co-locating with a Great Start Georgia resource coordinator to promote family support and engagement by sharing resources with families and teachers, and connecting eligible families to home visitation services.

programs seeking to expand their current child care program or open a new child care center within an E3Z. Eligible projects expanded current classroom capacity or created new classrooms, in order to serve additional birth to three year olds. Additionally, programs were required to create a minimum of two net new full-time jobs and establish at least 10 new additional infant-toddler slots.

Interested providers received multiple opportunities to learn more about the expansion grant process through the “In the Know” information sessions held in each E3Z. These sessions provided potential awardees the opportunity to receive answers to frequently asked questions, interactively review the grant application, and discuss eligible uses of funding.

The first three rounds of the Child Care Expansion Grant were open to Quality Rated providers within the E3Z’s, who achieved a two- or three-star rating. These rounds resulted in nine expansion grant applications being approved. The fourth and final round of the expansion grant, was open to all one-, two-, and three-star Quality Rated providers, in which seven grant applications were approved for funding. After four rounds of grant applications, the Child Care Expansion Grant initiative has awarded 16 expansion grants, totaling over \$1.1 million.⁷ The expansion grants will help support an additional 86 early childhood jobs and promote the quality of child care for an additional 638 infants and toddlers (see Table 1).

Table 1: DCA/DECAL Child Care Expansion Grant Summary

	Amount Awarded	No. of Grantees	No. of New Jobs Created	No. of New Infant/Toddler Slots Added
Round 1	\$82,293	1	5	15
Round 2	\$346,179	4	30	293
Round 3	\$281,089	4	17	97
Round 4	\$409,879	7	34	233
Totals	\$1,119,440	16	86	638

In October 2015, the E3Z North worked with Whitfield County Schools to secure a \$10,000 Innovation Fund Planning Grant to develop its proposed project, *Beyond the Classroom*, an initiative to target birth to age eight language and literacy development. In October 2016, Whitfield County Schools, with the help of the community partners in the E3Z North, was awarded an Innovation Fund Implementation Grant worth \$611,000 to implement *Beyond the Classroom*. The grant includes help from several community partners such as the Northwest Georgia Healthcare Partnership, the Georgia Department of Public Health, Get Georgia Reading, and the North Georgia Regional Library. The grant is being used to support the scale-up of two Power Lunches and Learning Academies, two programs which were previously piloted in Whitfield County Schools.

⁷ To find out more about the E3Z Child Care Expansion Grant and grantees, please visit the DECAL website: http://dec.al.ga.gov/documents/attachments/release_childcareexpansiongrants12-5-16.pdf.

Ongoing Community Events and Curated Professional Development

As the E3Z initiative continues to evolve, the partners continue to adapt to their communities' needs. As one coordinator wrote, "In the beginning we thought we knew exactly what our families needed and thought we were doing a pretty good job reaching out to them. We now have learned to listen to families, that what they need is quite different than just hosting a one-time event at a hard to reach, unknown to them facility and then patting ourselves on the back for doing such a good job for them."

The Clarke E3Z is working with two of its local hospitals to put together 1,200 packets for mothers and families of newborns. Each packet includes information on parenting skills, Quality Rated, and local resources for families. In September 2016, the Bibb E3Z began offering a weekly book exchange program called the Book Table. The initiative, sponsored by the United Way of Central Georgia, sells children's books for \$0.25 at the local farmers market every Wednesday.

Exchanges are free and unlimited to encourage literacy and entice children and families to return to the Book Table often.

Two of the zones, E3Z North and South Georgia E3Z, contain target communities—Dalton, GA (Whitfield County) and Valdosta, GA (Lowndes County)—for DPH's new Language and Food Nutrition Curriculum. The five-year project, with funding from the Office of Minority Health, includes public and private partnerships with government agencies and community-based organizations. The project has several aims:

- To increase the knowledge and capacity of early childhood educators by helping them learn to model good food and language nutrition for families to use at home
- To support a community-based intervention that brings together civic and business leaders to support the educational instruction, increase access to healthy foods and reading materials, and build strong protective factors to support improved outcomes
- To define a community disparities profile to define a way of measuring progress toward achieving improved outcomes for language and food nutrition
- To test interventions to assess progress and develop resources and best practices to support implementation of the program in other communities in Georgia, including other workforces that influence the age 0-3 population and their caregivers.⁸

Child care centers in each of the zones hosted listening sessions for early childhood professionals and families during summer 2016. The project is implementing the Eat. Move. Talk! curriculum



"...what our families need is quite different than just hosting a one-time event at a hard to reach, unfamiliar facility – and then patting ourselves on the back for planning a good event."

- E3Z Community Coordinator

⁸ To learn more about the project and read profiles of target communities, please visit the DPH website: <https://dph.georgia.gov/sites/dph.georgia.gov/files/OMH%20Health%20Disparities%20Draft%20web.pdf>.

with child care teachers and staff, Pre-K teachers, and families; providing stipends to teachers for training hours; and offering DECAL professional learning credits for early childhood professionals.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

While momentum is building in the E3Zs, the teams and partners involved in the initiative have all weathered important policy changes and administrative transitions that affect their collective goals of increasing the availability of high-quality early learning and development options and integrating new or expanded services into high-quality child care programs focused on children with high needs.

Policy Changes

One such change is a statewide policy change for how child care programs compliance designations within child care licensing system are determined. Prior to July 2016, a child care provider's designation of "compliant" or "noncompliant" with the state's child care licensing rules was determined each July 1st based on past performance over the prior year and remained in place for one year. Starting July 2016, the compliance designation includes more than two categories and is subject to change whenever a violation of licensing rules is found, or when it is corrected. This administrative change impacts Quality Rated and the E3Zs because, now child care providers can experience more frequent changes in their compliance designations. While any licensed program regardless of compliance designation can participate in Quality Rated, only providers "in good standing" can submit a portfolio and complete the rating process. In the zones, this type of change has a larger potential to impact the bottom line of percent participating and percent rated because the zones include much smaller numbers of total providers. The Clarke E3Z exemplifies this sensitivity to very small changes. In September 2016, six additional child care providers became eligible for Quality Rated even though no new providers began participating or were rated in Quality Rated. The small increase in the denominator contributed to the reduction in Clarke's overall participation and rated rates, as seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

In July 2016, two of the zones experienced major shifts in the total number of child care providers eligible to be in Quality Rated (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Figure 1 shows the overall change in Quality Rated participation rates within the zones and across the state, over the past six months. Child care programs are considered "participating" in Quality Rated when they complete a Quality Rated application. Figure 2 shows the overall change, over the past six months, in the percentage of programs rated in Quality Rated within the E3Zs and across the state. "Rated" in Quality Rated means that a child care program has earned either 1-, 2-, or 3-stars in the Quality Rated program.

Figure 1: Child Care Providers in Quality Rated (Participating)

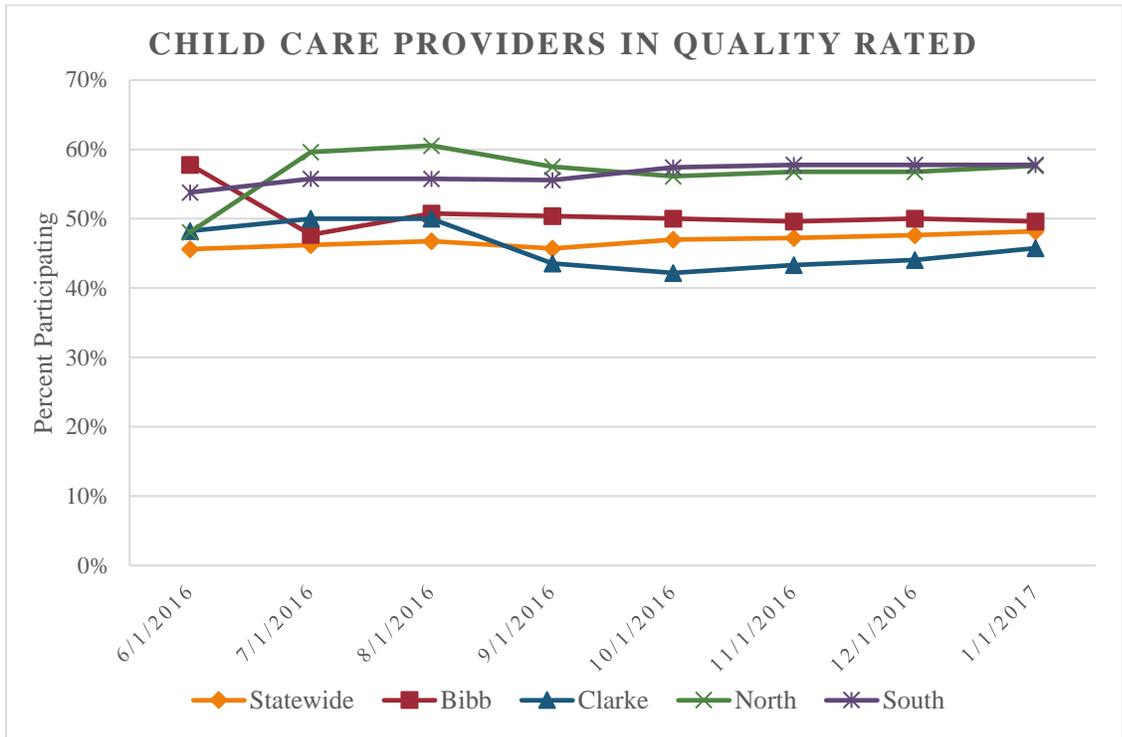
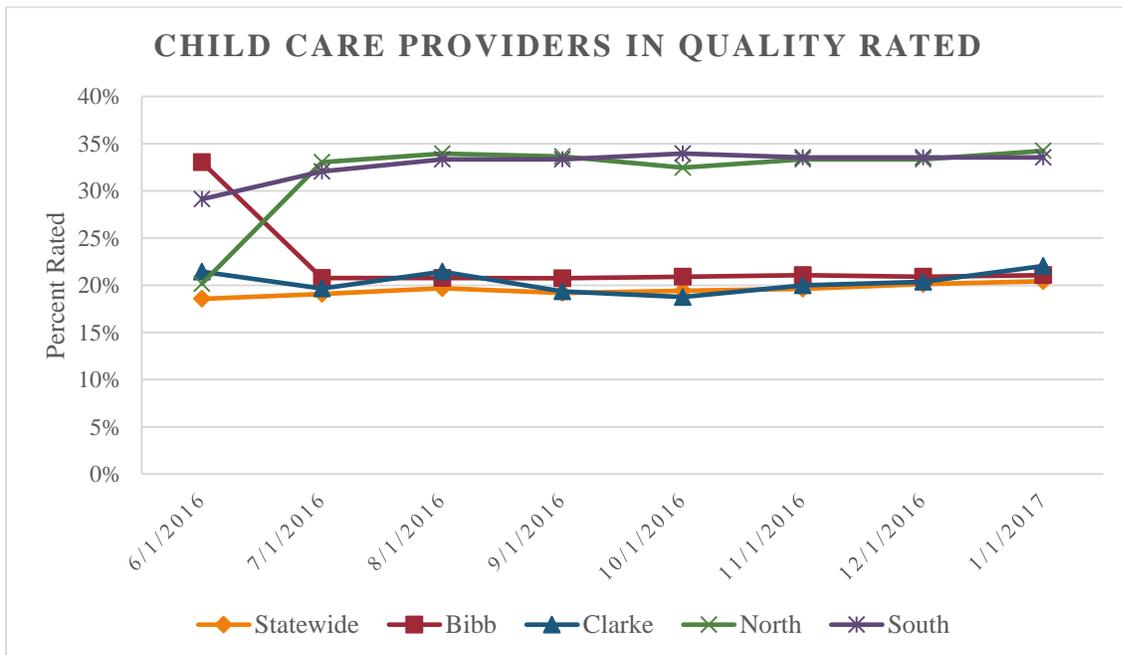


Figure 2: Child Care Providers in Quality Rated (Rated)



The Bibb E3Z saw approximately twenty more providers become eligible for Quality Rated, though the zone's overall number of licensed providers barely changed. Data related to Quality Rated participation and rated percentages shows steep decreases in the zone's percentages. However, the dips in their percentages are a result of changes in the number of providers becoming eligible and not a result of changes in the amount of providers participating and rated in Quality Rated. Similarly, the E3Z North saw a reduction in the number of licensed—and Quality Rated eligible—child care programs across the zone. This reduction produces an opposite effect than Bibb E3Z's changes in participating and rated percentages. Instead, for the E3Z North, the data show sharp increases in the percent of participating and rated programs. However, this sharp increase is due to underlying changes in the total number of licensed and eligible providers, and not solely to dramatic increases in participating and rated percentages. Each zone continues to surpass the statewide Quality Rated participation rate (20%), and three of four zones (including Bibb E3Z and E3Z North) continue to surpass the statewide Quality Rated percentage (48%) of star rated programs (Table 2).

Table 2: Quality Rated Participation and Rating Rates, Statewide & E3Z

	Licensed Child Care	QR Eligible ¹	Participating		Rated ²	
			No.	%	No.	%
E3Z North	111	111	64	58%	38	34%
Clarke E3Z	61	59	27	46%	13	22%
Bibb E3Z	134	133	66	50%	28	21%
South Georgia E3Z	161	161	93	58%	54	34%
Statewide	5,940	5,911	2,849	48%	1,207	20%

Source: Quality Rated Program, December 2016

Note: Percent participating and percent rated are based on the total number of eligible child care programs.

¹To be eligible to be rated, a child care program must be compliant with licensing regulations.

²Rated in Quality Rated means that a child care program has earned either 1-, 2-, or 3-stars in the Quality Rated program.

Administrative Transitions

The zones are also undergoing two types of administrative changes. The first is an administrative transition of the E3Z Director who has been a direct liaison between the Community Coordinators and varied DECAL programs and administrators. The E3Z Director moved to another position within DECAL in mid-December, and the position remains unfilled. E3Zs and Community Coordinators will need to adjust to maintain an open and direct flow of resources and information, as well as include DECAL representation at their ongoing Birth-to-Eight Team Meetings.

The second change is an administrative change of the Great Start Georgia program from the Georgia Department of Human Services-Division of Family and Children Services (DHS-DFCS) to the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), Maternal and Child Health Section (MCH). The switch affects the administration and oversight of the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early

Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grant and the E3Z's home visiting sites, since the zone's "hub" sites fall under the MIECHV funding. So far, the change has not affected implementation of the Great Start Georgia "hub" sites within the zones.

NEXT STEPS

Early Education Summits

In the next six months, the E3Zs are each planning their own Early Education Summit modeled after the South Georgia E3Z Early Education Summit.⁹ On a Monday evening in August 2016, the South Georgia E3Z hosted an Early Education Summit designed to provide an overview of the early education landscape in South Georgia with a focus on early literacy, as well as to emphasize the importance of high quality early learning opportunities for children ages birth to five. The event was attended by 115 community partners, including the local Birth to Eight Leadership Team, Great Start Georgia Home Visiting Program, Child Care Learning Centers, Family Child Care Learning Homes, Georgia's Pre-K, and local K-12 schools, local elected officials, numerous community and business leaders, and parents. The interest, activity, and momentum from this event resulted in successful partnerships that went on to collaborate and bring more resources, like grants and trainings, to the child care providers, families, and children in the region.

Mini Grants and Professional Development

For 2017, the E3Zs are gearing up to offer more specialized professional development opportunities within their zones. The Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies have been especially instrumental in supplying enhanced professional development opportunities within the zones.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the zones' Director's Networks and Peer Support Networks continue to be vocal in their demands for professional development to satisfy continuing education credits. Each zone is planning to strengthen the relationship between the Birth-to-Eight Team, peer support or directors' networks, and child care providers by helping design the annual \$25,000 mini grants offered by each CCR&R. Some zones are considering tying in mini grant funds to participation in the local Director's Network or attendance at the zone's Birth-to-Eight Team meeting. The mini grants, however, are still being designed and tailored to fit the needs of local child care providers.

CONCLUSION

The zones are dealing with the reality of slowing growth in Quality Rated saturation, because the number of providers participating and/or rated in Quality Rated is not growing as speedily as before. While the zones, and the rest of Georgia, embrace the two fronts of quality, initial quality

⁹ Read about the South Georgia E3Z Early Education Summit in the September 2016 ELC Newsletter: <http://conta.cc/2djwOTT>

¹⁰ Across the state, the regional CCR&R agencies are responsible for helping child care providers by providing trainings, technical assistance, national accreditation services, inclusion services, and more.

and continuous quality improvement, they are also learning that quality improvements take time and that, through sustained efforts, they are witnessing child care programs across their zones improve the quality of care provided to young children and their families.

At this stage of implementing the E3Z initiative, the zones are each benefiting from the local partnerships that are now in place. These partnerships led to multi-day, ongoing, community-specific events and resources aimed at improving the early childhood education landscape. One child care program in the E3Z North provides a good example of the type of incremental quality improvements each zone is building. When the E3Z North was formed, one child care provider, in particular, was not Quality Rated. However, since becoming involved in the zone's initiatives, the provider is now Quality Rated, housing an evidence-based home visitation program, participating in the zone's Director's Network, expanding its program with the help of over \$40,000 in expansion grant funds, and benefiting from other Quality Rated incentives and mini-grants. All of these improvements help individual child care providers and the whole early care and learning system ensure that all children have access to high-quality early learning and development options.

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