
Georgia’s Early Education Empowerment Zones, Evaluation Report

January 2018 – June 2018 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). Each zone includes 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).¹

The RT3-ELC grant priorities 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 grant priorities by using the core areas and focused investment areas as an outline for design and implementation.² 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

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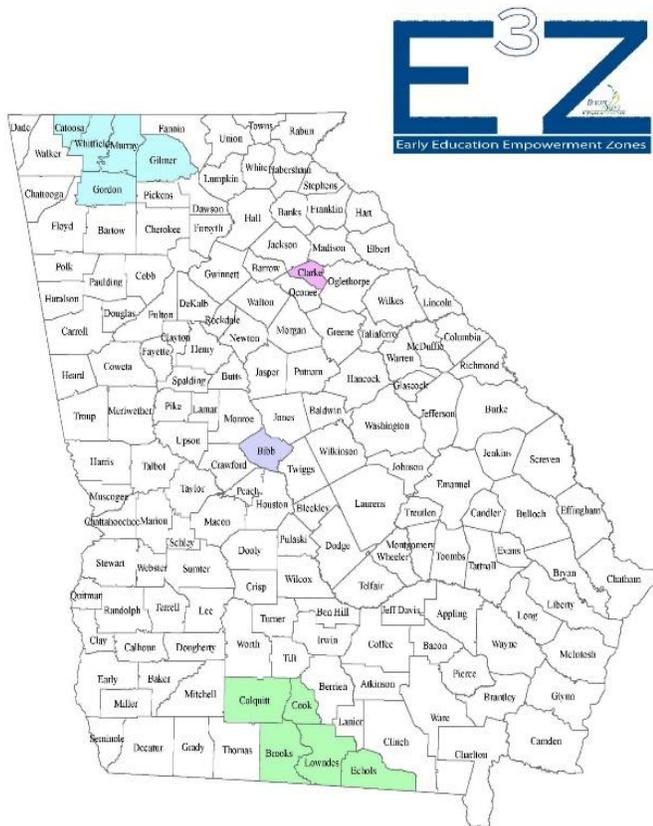
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¹ The E3Zs are listed in order of geography, from North Georgia to South Georgia. The counties within the E3Z North and South Georgia E3Z are presented in geographic order from west to east.

² 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>.

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 projects and programs related to E3Z implementation. 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 needs.³



The purpose of this report is to summarize the recent RT3-ELC grant activities (January to June 2018) 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 the next steps planned within the zones.⁴

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 Previous E3Z reports can be found on the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) website: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/race-top-early-learning-challenge-grant-evaluation>

⁴ 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>.

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 JANUARY 2018 AND JUNE 2018

The E3Zs have an established role in their communities that has allowed them to serve as important liaisons that connect community members and facilitate partnerships according to shared goals and needs.

The Birth-to-Eight Teams and Community Coordinators have partnered closely with other communities and initiatives to emphasize literacy. For example, they have partnered with the Get Georgia Reading Campaign to educate community members about the importance of early childhood literacy. The shared literacy focus has brought together community partners throughout and beyond the E3Zs.

The zones also continued to utilize external resources and grants to support their communities. The Two-Gen Innovation Grant continues to support working parents who wish to pursue additional education without having to sacrifice quality child care for their children. Grant recipients, including the Clarke and Bibb E3Zs, have researched which community needs would be best supported with grant funds and have supported each other in grant implementation. Most recently, the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) Early Literacy Mini-Grants were awarded to eight community members within E3Zs (in Bibb, Cook, Gilmer, Murray, and Whitfield counties), providing the communities with additional sources of funding to further the goals of improving and supporting early childhood education.

The E3Z teams have continued to participate in vital cross-community collaboration and engage in Team Time, a designated time where E3Zs attend each other's Birth-to-Eight Team meetings and visit local child care centers. They have also begun to serve as important facilitators for the Georgia Home Visiting Program, which provides communities, parents, and children with support and resources that promote child well-being.

The E3Z network will continue to grow through an upcoming expansion in September 2018 that will cover six regions across Georgia.

RECENT E3Z ACTIVITIES

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 innovative, local initiatives aimed at reaching the common goal of an improved early care and education system.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Through their trials and successes, the zones are inspiring other communities to make early care, literacy, and education a priority. The zones are also working to build a shared early care and education agenda within their communities and support each other in their initiatives.

Literacy Collaboration and Initiatives

The E3Zs actively engaged in a variety of local and collaborative literacy initiatives. E3Z-South launched a Read Across Valdosta initiative where Mayor John Gale of Valdosta dedicated his time to visit and read at child care programs throughout the area. Child care program directors have been excited to participate in such a rewarding opportunity, and the mayor's commitment to early literacy and education has solidified the initiative as a priority for the region. E3Z-South has also developed the Lowndes Literacy Team of Advocates and Leaders, which began to meet in June 2018 to discuss literacy and potential literacy initiatives in Lowndes County. The initial team meeting had 36 participants, including special guests from Literacy for All through the Georgia Literacy Commission, who shared literacy data specific to both Colquitt and Lowndes counties. The team will reconvene monthly and plans to continue advancing literacy efforts in the area. To start, they will pilot some of the Georgia Literacy Commission's electronic resources.

All E3Z's collaborated closely with the [Get Georgia Reading Campaign](#), which utilizes four research-based pillars and a clearly-defined common agenda to create the conditions for children to become proficient readers by the end of third grade.⁵ In January 2018, E3Z-South helped to recruit community partners for the Get Georgia Reading Campaign and Early Language and Literacy event in Albany. Get Georgia Reading representatives from the Georgia Family Connection Partnership conducted focus groups during Birth-to-Eight Team meetings in all four E3Zs. During the focus groups, the Birth-to-Eight Teams and attending community members provided feedback on Get Georgia Reading's impact on the team and community. The focus group discussions led to the conclusion that the E3Z work continues to align with Get Georgia Reading's work and goals.

Bibb E3Z also helped organize a Get Georgia Reading event in June 2018, which brought together a variety of stakeholders and served as a powerful networking opportunity. E3Z-North has incorporated Get Georgia Reading principles into its work. Adjacent counties expressed interest in participating in Get Georgia Reading discussions, which will continue to spread the importance of childhood literacy across most of Northwest Georgia. The E3Z and Get Georgia

⁵ More information on the Get Georgia Reading Campaign can be found on the website: <http://getgeorgiareading.org/>.

Reading partnership has served as an opportunity to educate community members on early childhood literacy and has provided a platform for networking with adjacent counties and potential E3Z partners.

Continuation of Two-Generation Innovation

In 2016, Georgia was one of five states to receive the Parents and Children Thriving Together (PACTT) grant from the National Governors Association and the Center for Law and Social Policy. The PACTT grant supports three Two-Gen Innovation Grants in Georgia. Two-Gen Innovation Grants are one-year, \$16,000 grants to pilot or expand community strategies that connect the early learning and postsecondary/workforce systems at the local level. The two-generation approach supports children from low-income families with high-quality early learning, while also supporting their families in attaining education, training, and, ultimately, jobs that lead to economic self-sufficiency.⁵

During 2017, DECAL selected three Georgia communities to receive Two-Gen Innovation Grants: Bibb County, Clarke County, and Clayton County. With these funds, each county has developed their own approach and partners. Clarke E3Z, for example, has continued to see consistent impact from the PACTT grant. The Clarke Community Coordinator conducted Child Care Resources and Referral (CCR&R) and professional development training for their local partners, Athens Technical College, and the Clarke County School District: Office of Early Learning, to share details about the grant initiative. During this training, community members brainstormed how to identify the grant's target families and inform families about how they can obtain their GED, engage in workforce training, or enroll their children in a high-quality early learning environment. The initiative has also introduced the Clarke E3Z to new community partners that directly relate to the purpose of the Two-Gen Innovation Grant and the E3Zs, such as the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission's workforce division. The zone is now working closely with Athens Technical College and Envision Athens to support working parents who wish to pursue further education without sacrificing high-quality child care.

The Two-Gen Innovation Grant has also facilitated conversations about how agencies and community members can collaborate to ensure economic stability for all families. For example, Bibb E3Z continues to gather information and insight about how to utilize the grant to best fit the community's economic needs. Specifically, the Bibb coordinator and E3Z colleagues held a focus group at Central Georgia Technical College to gather information about the needs of students with young children or of students entering college. Members of the grant working group have also attended Two-Gen Innovation Grant events in Clarke and Clayton counties, such as the week of Young Child Activities held at PACTT partner locations to support other communities who share similar goals and gather ideas for grant implementation.

⁵ The Two-Gen Innovation Grants are made possible through a partnership between DECAL, the University System of Georgia, the Technical College System of Georgia, the Department of Economic Development Workforce Division, and the Department of Labor.

Team Time and Cross-Community Collaboration

The E3Zs consistently communicate and collaborate with each other to share successes, experiences, and resources. Community members and coordinators often attend events held by other E3Zs and engage in Team Time, which provides a platform through which E3Zs can communicate their work with each other.

E3Z teams met for Team Time at the Clarke E3Z in January, at E3Z North in March, and at the Bibb E3Z in May. The visits consisted of two days: one dedicated to Team Time, and the second dedicated to visiting local child care centers or attending Birth-to-Eight Team meetings.

E3Z's structure and impact has also spread outside of the designated zones. For example, Glynn County has formed an unofficial E3Z to support early childhood care and education and engage with community resources in their area. The unofficial E3Z has developed and grown its own Birth-to-Eight Team and has followed E3Z practices to facilitate community collaboration.

Another example of cross-community collaboration is the sustained relationship between the Valdosta-Lowndes Chamber of Commerce and E3Z South. The Chamber of Commerce both participates in and supports the initiatives of the E3Z South team. It acknowledges that the E3Z's facilitation of quality child care contributes to the success of the business community, allows parents to participate more fully in the workforce, and impacts the future state of the workforce. This acknowledgement demonstrates the impact of the E3Z community and the potential for collaboration between private-sector businesses and quality child care and early childhood learning.

Georgia Home Visiting Program

Cross-community collaboration was also facilitated through continued E3Z partnerships with the Georgia Home Visiting Program (GHVP), an initiative sponsored by the Georgia Department of Public Health that provides families with resources and support before and after the birth of a child.⁶ E3Z teams worked with local community partners to expand the GHVP network and increase the number of families served by the program. From January to June 2018, First Steps Georgia referred 3,316 families to community service providers, and at least 172 families were served through the GHVP.⁷

E3Z teams and families also participated in a variety of family engagement events and partnerships. The GHVP in E3Z North, for example, has partnered with the city police department to provide enrolled families with car seats, and collaborated with Gordon Central High School for monthly teen parent workshops. Bibb E3Z, meanwhile, hosted a fruit and vegetable market sponsored by the Bibb County Health Department to promote healthy food choices, and facilitated Parents as Teachers workshops, which equip parents with skills that support their young children's early development, learning, and health.

⁶ For more information about the Georgia Home Visiting Program please visit: <https://gahomevisiting.org/>.

⁷ First Steps Georgia provides universal services for all expectant parents or families with children from birth to five.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

From January to June 2018, each of the zones struggled to find ways to incentivize local child care programs to become Quality Rated.⁸ In addition to child care programs deciding not to join the Quality Rated system, changes in leadership—both within local government and related community partners—have impacted Quality Rated efforts throughout all zones.

Measuring Continued Progress

Over the past three years since E3Z implementation began, the E3Zs exhibited record growth in the number of child care programs that are participating and rated in Quality Rated, as well as the percentage of Quality Rated child care programs who serve children receiving Child Care and Parent Services (CAPS) subsidies. Still, the zones continued to increase their overall percentages of child care programs either participating or being rated in Quality Rated by partnering with local business organizations and community members. In June 2018, 86% of E3Z child care programs that were eligible for Quality Rated were participating in Quality Rated.

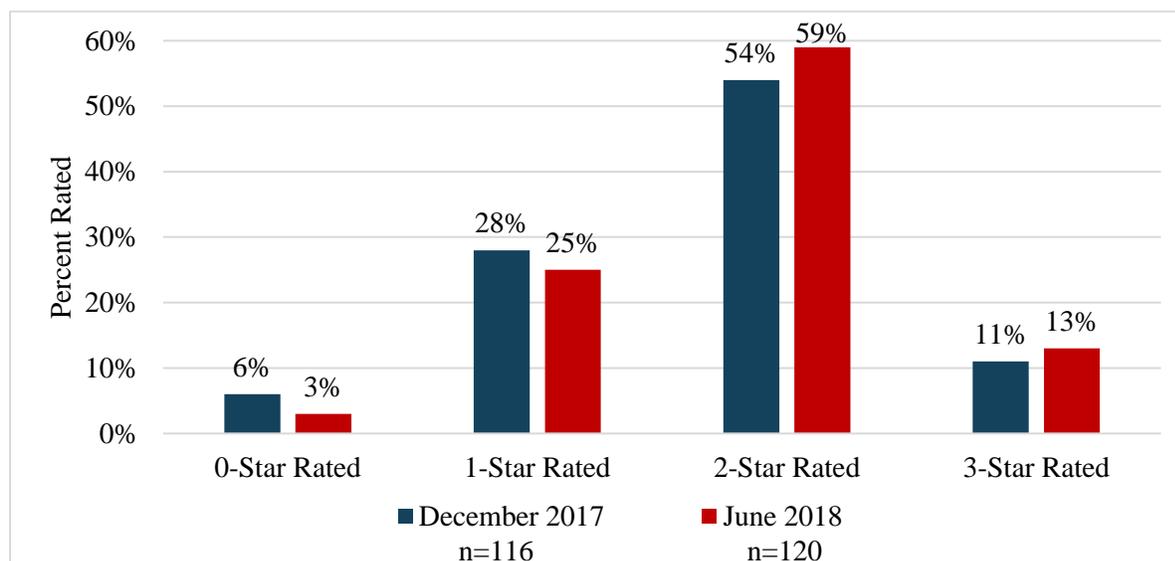
Approximately 54% of eligible E3Z child care programs were rated. The growth, however, has slowed, and the zones continue to look for ways to incentivize providers to join Quality Rated. Some E3Zs have noted specific challenges. For example, Clarke E3Z has reported that many of its highest quality child care centers do not accept CAPS, so families that rely on CAPS have no choice but to enroll in centers and homes that are of lesser quality.

One incentive for providers – especially those wanting to continue accepting CAPS subsidies – to become Quality Rated is the CAPS 2020 deadline. 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 CAPS funding. 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.

Unlike CAPS, Quality Rated does not yet have a high-stakes deadline attached to participation or increasing ratings. Child care providers that do not want to be involved with Quality Rated—which could include faith-based providers, family child care providers, providers with low enrollment numbers, or providers in remote geographic areas—have little reason to alter their current business practices. The zones continue to brainstorm other ways to incentivize all centers to become Quality Rated.

⁸ For more information on Quality Rated, Georgia's Quality Rating and Improvement System, please visit <https://qualityrated.dec.state.ga.us/>.

Figure 1: 2018 E3Z Growth in Quality Ratings



(*Note: Figure 1 only includes rated programs. It omits 75 participating but not rated programs from December 2017, and 72 participating but not rated programs from June 2018.)

Program ratings of child care programs continue to increase as well. Figure 1 demonstrates the rise in higher-rated programs from December 2017 to June 2018. By June 2018, the percentage of rated programs had grown, with increases in the percentages of 2-star and 3-star rated programs.⁹

Importance of Early Childhood Education

The E3Zs continued to emphasize the importance of early childhood education in their local community despite the inevitability of changing political and organizational leadership. The zones and coordinators engaged with potential and new local government and agency administration to communicate the importance of affordable quality care and explain the complexities of the early learning system.

NEXT STEPS & CONCLUSION

Grant Implementation

The E3Zs have continued to both implement past grants and attain funding from new grants. Most recently, the zones were also able to help their community organizations secure new grants to support early language and literacy. GOSA Early Language and Literacy Mini-Grants finalists were announced in January 2018, and a total of eight grants were awarded to E3Z participants.

⁹ A 0-star rated program is a child care provider who has undergone the full Quality Rated process but did not score enough points to earn a star rating.

Upcoming Expansion

In fall 2018, E3Zs will transition from supporting 12 counties across four zones to supporting all counties in Georgia across six regions.¹⁰ The new Early Education Community Partnership Regions will include: North East, North West, Central East, Central West, South East, and South West. Six regionally-based Early Education Community Partnership Coordinators and one manager will support this initiative.¹¹ These new Early Education Community Partnership Regions will scale the E3Z work to span the entire state of Georgia and will continue to coordinate the delivery of available state and local services for young children and families, support quality child care settings, work with community stakeholders, and create public awareness of early education services.

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:

- ***Suzanne Harbin, E3Z North Community Coordinator****
- ***Clayton Adams, Clarke E3Z Community Coordinator***
- ***Bridgette Washington, Bibb E3Z Community Coordinator***
- ***Jill O'Meara, South Georgia E3Z Community Coordinator & E3Z Manager***

(*Note: Suzanne Harbin stepped down from the E3Z North Community Coordinator position in April 2018.)

¹⁰ The Early Education Community Partnership Regions will be funded by the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) grant, rather than by the RT3-ELC grant.

¹¹ Clayton Adams and Bridgette Washington will continue to serve as Community Coordinators. Jill O'Meara will continue to serve in the manager position.