

Project Title: Improving Iowa’s Early Childhood System: PDG B-5 Grant
Applicant: Iowa Department of Management
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A. PROJECT ABSTRACT

This project will accelerate Iowa’s momentum toward a fully coordinated, mixed delivery system of care and education for young children birth through five and their families. Acknowledging the unparalleled brain development that occurs during these early years, our system aims to support optimum experiences for all children, particularly those most vulnerable because of poverty, rurality, and early risks that threaten developmental success. Our long-term goals are that all children enter kindergarten with the skills necessary for success, and that all families have access to the quality services they need to support children’s healthy growth and development starting at birth. To actualize this goal, however, we need more comprehensive information about the nature and extent of school readiness gaps, who is - *or is not* - served in our mixed delivery system, and how our efforts improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

Nearly 250,000 children under age 5, (21% non-white) live in Iowa, including 68,000 preschool-aged children (i.e., 3-4 years old). The state has one of the highest percentages of households with young children where both, or the only, parent(s) are in the workforce (75% vs. 65% nationwide), and 29% of young children live in rural counties. For more than three decades Iowa has invested in early childhood services, with the last twenty years expanding to systems improvement and capacity building. Milestones include a universal state-funded preschool, a comprehensive program for low-income families, and a legislatively established alliance with a mandated charge to improve program coordination: Early Childhood Iowa (ECI). ECI includes leadership from the Departments of Education, Public Health, Human Services, Workforce Development, Economic Development, and Human Rights with private sector stakeholders, and a system of local area boards that fund and coordinate B-5 services in every county. While we have made great progress, our efforts are incomplete as we share the national challenge of disconnection and scant data to comprehensively document children’s needs, developmental capacities, and services available to support them (Early Childhood Data Collaborative, 2016).

The purpose of this project is to capitalize on recent work to develop an integrated administrative data system (IDS) that will inform program coordination and quality improvement through a collaborative approach that engages multi-sector ECI stakeholders. Activities propose to understand gaps in existing programs, particularly for vulnerable and underserved children, and use this information to increase parent knowledge, improve professional practice, and raise the overall quality of our B-5 system.

We propose a phased approach to the statewide needs assessment (with Phase I completed during the current PDG) that will inform strategic planning and implementation of quality improvement activities. We anticipate that our needs assessment and strategic plan will be revised over time as we generate evidence about the performance measures associated with the proposed changes to our mixed delivery system using our IDS in combination with other data collection that we hope to eventually build into the IDS. We anticipate submission and approval of our needs assessment and strategic plan during month 8, leaving the final 4 months of our PDG to focus on Activity 5.