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Christie Administration Announces More Than \$44 Million “Race To The Top” Early Learning Challenge Grant To Improve Early Childhood Education

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Grant Will Help Improve Access To High-Quality Early Learning And Development Programs For High Needs New Jersey Children

Trenton, NJ – The Christie Administration announced today that New Jersey will receive a \$44.3 million Race To The Top (RTTT) Early Learning Challenge Grant to help improve access to high-quality early learning and development programs for thousands of high needs children throughout the state.

The funding will implement an initiative that sets standards to guide the quality of programming, broadens training for program staff, and provides parents with a Consumer Reports-like rating system of early learning providers.

“Ensuring access to a high-quality education for every New Jersey student has been a priority of this Administration since day one in office,” said Governor Christie. “We have made great progress to improve the educational experience for all New Jersey students, from children in early learning education programs to students attending one of New Jersey’s many institutions of higher learning. I thank our federal partners and state departments for working together to secure this grant that will vastly improve the lives of children throughout the state.”

The funding will help implement the New Jersey Early Learning Plan establishing a coordinated system of early education and care. The plan was created through the collaboration of four state agencies – the Departments of Education, Children and Families, Health, and Human Services – as well as the New Jersey Council for Young Children, which includes other public, private, state and local partners.

“This is a bold, statewide plan to provide more high-quality early childhood opportunities for children, with a focus on giving parents the information they need to access effective early learning programs, and giving program providers the tools they need to improve services,” said Education Commissioner Chris Cerf. “In the end, we anticipate our effort will reach at least 83,300 high-needs children, from pregnancy through age 8, over the four years of the grant. This grant is the result of the hard work of Departments across the state, as well as the strong voice and support of advocate groups throughout New Jersey, and I thank them for all of their efforts on behalf of our students.”

The heart of the plan calls for developing a statewide quality rating improvement system called “Grow NJ Kids,” which is currently a pilot program in 56 sites in four counties. Through Grow NJ Kids, a set of standards will provide a roadmap to improve the quality of programming offered from birth to school-entry ages. Early learning and development program administrators will perform a self-evaluation that, when complete, will help determine the overall quality of the program. The evaluation will serve as a basis for professional development and other improvements. Ratings will be assigned to each program to help parents in the decision-making process.

Grow NJ Kids will expand from a pilot of 56 programs to 1,790 early learning and development programs over four years.

The New Jersey Early Learning Plan contains other initiatives to be implemented by 2018, including –

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- New Jersey will have a self-sustaining Training Academy to coordinate professional development for programs that serve high-needs children. Academy staff and specialists are expected to provide training on implementing Grow NJ Kids to approximately 20,000 early childhood educators and related staff.
- New Jersey will implement an aligned set of early learning standards from birth to grade three.
- The NJ Kindergarten Entry Assessment (NJKEA) will be created to help classroom teachers determine a starting point for each child's instruction.
- The state will build awareness of Grow NJ Kids by reaching out to parents, especially from culturally and linguistically diverse families, through the use of multilingual documents, video clips, and online.
- The four state agencies involved with early learning will align their data systems, leading to better communications and the ability to evaluate the success of initiatives.

Governor Christie submitted the Race to the Top application on behalf of the state to the US Department of Education on October 16. New Jersey was one of 16 states and District of Columbia to apply for this round of the RTTT Early Learning Challenge grants.

Altogether, New Jersey has received more than \$180 million to improve educational opportunities in New Jersey in the last three years. This has included:

- \$55 million in School Improvement Grants (SIG) to aggressively intervene in 9 low-performing schools.
- \$38 million in Race to the Top 3 awards, half of which will go directly to districts and charter schools to support components of the state's reform strategy, and half of which will be used by the Department of Education in this effort.
- \$14.5 million in Charter School Program (CSP) funds to continually increase the quality of and accountability for charter schools across the state.
- \$5 million in federal funds to expand the state's current data system from K-12 into one that tracks students from pre-k through entry into the workforce.
- \$24 million in federal funds over six years to the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education for its Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative, helping students transition successfully from high school to college.

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