

## Project Description: Kentucky Leading the Way

**Throughout, items that are in bold and underlined are expected project outcomes.**

*In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, approximately 9 in 10 children who start behind in kindergarten are still behind in Third grade<sup>1</sup>.* Kentucky annually screens children at kindergarten entry. For the past five years, screening results have shown that about 50% of Kentucky's incoming kindergarteners are ready to start school. Just how significant is this issue? In 2019, 52% of Kentucky's children were not proficient readers in the third grade—and aggregate data such as these do not adequately represent disparities in achievement across demographic groups. As examples, 70.3% of African American children, 60.7% of Latino children, and 70.2% of English Learner children who speak English were below proficiency in reading in the third grade<sup>2</sup>. *We know that education is the key to just about every challenge we face.* And the pandemic only has intensified and underscored the importance of the original goals of the Kentucky Governor's Office of Early Childhood (KYGOEC). They are to promote greater collaboration, emphasize quality and continuous improvement, and ensure that more children enter kindergarten prepared. The COVID-19 pandemic elevated our attention on the value of comprehensive quality early care and education services, including affiliated services in physical, mental, and behavioral health, family support and social capital.

During the 2000 legislative session, House Bill 706 unanimously was passed in both chambers of the Kentucky Legislature. At that time, this landmark legislation addressed the needs of the whole child, including health care, family assistance, high-quality education, and community involvement. In addition, it committed 25% of the Kentucky Tobacco Settlement

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<sup>1</sup> Kentucky Center for Statistics, personal communication, n.d.

<sup>2</sup> KDE Board Meeting Presentation December 2021

Fund annually to support early childhood programming and services. This foundational and ground-breaking legislation created opportunities for Kentucky to develop its highly comprehensive, coordinated, early childcare and education system, which is inclusive of center-based care, family child care, home visitation services, early intervention services, and infant and toddler services, among others. Since this initial legislation, Kentucky has continued to set the pace nationally with its strategic leadership, consistent investments, deeply rooted collaborative partnerships, focused programming, and commitment to data-driven decision making.

Kentucky was one of the first states to develop Early Childhood Standards, an Office of Early Childhood, a consensus-driven definition of kindergarten readiness, and an Early Childhood Profile, which is an annual report that details progress towards early childhood goals at state, county, and regional levels. More recently, Kentucky is one of the first states to develop an Administrator/Director Apprenticeship program, which addresses workforce development and professionalization across the state.

In 2019, our office received and implemented a \$10.6 million Preschool Development Grant; our achievements and lessons learned are described throughout this application. It included a comprehensive Needs Assessment, which led to the development of the 2019-2024 statewide strategic plan. Fiscal mapping activities, also completed during the planning grant, underscored the infrastructure challenges for early childhood in Kentucky. With three oversight entities at the state level, the need for aligned and unified investments and collaborative partnerships was apparent. Since that time, there has been a change in state administration with ensuing turnover as well as a global pandemic. With support of leadership, our priorities were re-focused and streamlined. Staff re-organized around our core functions: promoting the state's vision for high-quality, shared measurement; alignment of strategies and resources; building

public will and advancing public policy; and securing new and innovative funding sources at the state and local levels. More recently, there is an elevated focus on aligning investments for impact, workforce content expertise, and field support for impact and innovation in communities across the state. Even though Kentucky was not awarded the second Preschool Development Grant, we still advanced the goals identified from the strategic plan during the pandemic while balancing multiple staff turnover. Highlights from the Commonwealth's recent progress include:

- Secured \$2 million from the Division of Child Care to expand Apprenticeship Portfolio.
- Became one of the first states in the nation to establish an Administrator/Director Apprenticeship to elevate the profession. The inaugural class has over 70 practitioners from approximately 40 employers in childcare, public preschool and Head Start.
- Managed formal statewide launch of revised Early Childhood Standards; developed unified training and practical practitioner resources, including an interactive web-based tool.
- Refreshed companion piece to the Early Childhood Standards for families and caregivers.
- Increased investment more than 200% over one year for Regional Collaborative Network.
- Defined and documented, for the first time, nearly ten data-driven strategies known as *Kentucky Bright Spots* across the Commonwealth; nearly \$6 million is being allocated to help scale proven strategies.
- Gained approval for nearly \$8 million to be invested to grow early intervention to support a child's future mental health and build strong social and emotional skills.
- Re-envisioned the annual Early Childhood Institute (ECI) for professional development into targeted and high-quality series of cross-sector trainings.

Ensuring equity and healthy beginnings starts with access, quality, and outcomes. Since the close of the planning grant, Kentucky and its cross-sector partners have worked to unify and

increase shared accountability and strengthen and cultivate key partners across the Commonwealth. Our innovative and ambitious plan will continue to transform the Commonwealth to change the trajectory. To do this, we will coordinate and collaborate in meaningful ways at the highest level of state and local leadership to ensure lasting change. This three-year grant renewal opportunity allows Kentucky to work with and through our deep-rooted, cross-sector partnerships to refresh the Needs Assessment (**Activity 1**) and strategic plan (**Activity 2**) that have guided our work since 2019. The refresh allows a new opportunity to enhance and innovate around new data and challenges due to the pandemic. The fiscal mapping completed during the 2019 planning grant underscored the infrastructure challenges for early childhood in Kentucky.

With this grant, our “North Star” will be to work, behave and invest differently to support working families to ensure children have a strong start in school and life and grow Kentucky’s economy in the process. We will do this by working across key federal, state, and local funding streams. We also will uncover Kentucky’s data-driven best practices (inclusive of workforce and emerging trends, business-led solutions, and transitions) and document exemplar practices, opportunities, and gaps (**Activities 1 through 6**) with attention to supporting mental and social/emotional health via inclusive practices and trauma-informed care through coordinated applications/eligibility and enrollment systems (**Bonus Activity**). Finally, we will effectively transition children across the continuum of educational milestones, prioritizing highly vulnerable and un- or under-served children. We will bolster training, technical assistance, and capacity building while we influence the adoption of an evidence-based advocacy and policy roadmap. Kentucky will maximize parent and family engagement strategies by increasing parent and caregiver knowledge and coordinating and elevating parent and caregiver coalitions. Families

will be engaged and provided elevated leadership opportunities to serve as their child's first and best teacher and advocate (**Activities 3 and 5**). We will identify, establish, and cultivate multi-generational literacy strategies to ensure a world-class education for children, families, and professionals to improve family outcomes and break the cycle of poverty.

One of our office's foundational goals is to promote greater collaboration between state and local communities. The Kentucky Regional Collaborative Network is the platform used to unite and align early childhood strategies in local communities to address the critical early years of a child's life, reducing duplication while leveraging additional resources to ensure children in their community have a strong start. With enhanced investments and support, the Network will continue to build their capacity to implement the state's blueprint, with attention to local needs and priorities. Through our partnership with Kentucky Center for Statistics, we will continue to produce the annual Early Childhood Profile and its newly developed companion piece, which underscores and highlights strategic investments and data-driven solutions. With enhanced training, technical assistance, and capacity building, (**Activity 5**) we will develop best-in-class data capabilities to track and invest in *Kentucky Bright Spots*, strategies that are documented as effective and meaningful in communities across the state. Additionally, we will elevate best practices for transitioning children and families between services and programs, expand practice-based coaching in trauma-informed care and inclusionary practices for practitioners, and expand behavioral mental health services for families and children. Finally, being a catalyst and a change agent means paying particular attention to the state's ecosystem for our youngest learners. According to "The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons from the States"<sup>3</sup>, key strategies for building and maintaining high-quality systems are: **(1) prioritizing quality and**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/road-high-quality-early-learning-lessons-states>

**continuous improvement; (2) training and coaching for program staff; (3) coordinating the administration of birth-through-third-grade programs; (4) strategically combining multiple funding sources to increase access and improve quality; and (5) creating broad-based coalitions and support.** This is our commitment; this is our work.

With support from the highest level of leadership in the state, funding from the Preschool Development Grant will help take Kentucky's coordinated system of governance to the next level, helping families and caregivers engage as leaders and better navigate the system, reduce duplication, and improve outcomes. Kentucky will grow data-driven best practices, support family choice and informed decision-making, ensure that there is a coordinated, comprehensive plan to attract new professionals into the field and help stabilize the workforce pipeline while maintaining a comprehensive and sustainable approach for the success of young children to ensure that Kentucky is the best place to start and raise a family.