



U.S. Department of Education PDG Annual Performance Report Executive Summary

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Grantee State: AZ

PR/Award #: S419A150009

You are required to submit an Executive Summary of up to 3000 words with your Annual Performance Report. This summary should relate to your approved application and summarize the goals and objectives that have been achieved under your grant, what you learned, and any evaluation results. Describe any unanticipated outcomes or benefits from your project and any barriers that you may have encountered. If there have been any changes to the project from the approved application, those should be explained as well.

Overview of Progress

In 2016, Arizona made accelerated progress in its efforts to expand access to high-quality preschool and to enhance early learning systems through participation in the Preschool Development Grant opportunity. We applied for and received \$20 million per year through this grant. In our original grant application we provided details on how the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) would partner with its sister agency, First Things First (FTF), to improve the quality and scope of early learning in Arizona. In 2016, this continued partnership enabled us the opportunity to provide 2,307 slots for four year olds in programs that met *all* elements of the structural definition of high-quality preschool programming in 32 high-need communities (HNCs) in Arizona. In year one, we had several challenges that were reflected on during our on-site monitoring from our program officer. As a result of that visit, we developed a corrective action plan to address three key areas: the recruitment of teachers with Bachelor's degrees; full-day programming; and comparable teacher salaries. We continued to work on these areas in year two so we could increase the number of children served. As a result, we saw an increase of 1,055 children and 5 HNCs from our first year. The 32 HNCs are spread across five counties and were selected based on an original set of four criteria. The data points used to select HNCs were: areas identified with high rates of students receiving free and reduced lunch; areas where more than 25% of the students served identified as being English language learners (ELLs); areas predicted to be serving less than 50% of their capacity based on ADE's K-3 enrollment formula; and lastly, the local education agencies (LEAs) in the HNCs must have earned a C or better on the State's A-F school report system.

Key Highlights and Accomplishments

- **The development of an *Early Childhood Task Force on Inclusion***

In January 2016, ADE started work on the development of its Early Childhood Task Force on Inclusion. The purpose of the task force is to increase inclusive opportunities for children with low incidence disabilities, and to support teachers and administrators as they work to provide high-quality inclusionary environments and practices. The make-up of the task force includes representatives from Arizona's early childhood system: public school teachers, public school and district administrators, private child care teachers and administrators, Head Start teachers and administrators, United Way, early childhood and special education instructors from Arizona's institutes of higher education. The task force is utilizing the Leading by Convening model for the structure of this community of practice, and following implementation science as the core mechanism for moving the group from theory to practice. The data points that underpin the task force on inclusion are: rates on the number of children served in their least

restrictive environment; the availability and quality of least restrictive environment continuum of placement options; and the results of an inclusion survey conducted by ADE through Arizona's Early Childhood Workforce Registry.

The inclusion survey questioned respondents in the following five areas: Attitudes and Beliefs; Interpretation of the *Individuals with Disabilities Act*; Staff expertise and training; Comprehensive services; and Building partnerships. The survey was sent out to public education agency staff; Head Start staff; and other early childhood partner organizations. The respondents were able to self-identify their roles, and if we overlooked a role, they could add it. We received 371 responses from all but two of the fifteen counties in Arizona. Currently, the task force includes representation from Maricopa, Pima, Apache (tribe), and Navajo (tribe) counties. As a result of meetings in 2016, the task force accomplished three things: created a mission and vision; established a common definition of inclusion; and reviewed the survey data to serve as information to inform the direction of the task force.

- **The use of *College Scholarships* to support degree attainment**

In our original application, we said with funding from the Preschool Development Grant we would ambitiously invest in College Scholarships for Early Childhood Professionals, a First Things First funding strategy. The intent of this evidence-informed professional development strategy is to provide access to higher education for the early childhood workforce working directly with, or on behalf of, young children birth through age five. The expected results of supporting continuing education and degree completion is elevating and professionalizing the field, recruiting and retaining a quality early childhood workforce, and supporting and increasing the quality of services provided to young children. In 2016, Preschool Development Grant funds were used to fund 203 students pursuing Bachelor's degrees in early childhood or early childhood special education! The total number of credit hours paid for in 2016 was 3,487!

- **The collaborative work with Arizona's Institutes of Higher Education**

In our original application, we said we would provide technical assistance to Arizona's institutes of higher education (IHE) who wish to re-evaluate the coursework for the early childhood and early childhood special education certificates. In addition, we proposed partnering with IHEs to provide professional development academies for ECE/ECSE faculty on the components of a high-quality preschool program linking directly to Arizona's documents in the early learning continuum and child development spanning the ages of birth to 8. In 2016, ADE collaborated with the Head Start State Collaboration Office and First Things First (FTF) to co-host a two-day, in-person opportunity for representatives of Arizona's institutes of higher education. During this opportunity, early childhood representatives from the various institutes reviewed and worked on the alignment of ECE course objectives for their respective ECE/ECSE programs of study. There were approximately 50 participants from Arizona's various IHEs, inclusive of public and private institutions. ADE used Preschool Development Grant funds to provide stipends to attendees to cover the cost of travel and overnight stay.

Additionally, In October 2016, ADE hosted an informational session for IHEs to learn about accreditation for institutes of higher education through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). A representative from NAEYC's national team led the informational sessions and provided an overview of the whole accreditation process. After much consideration, and through collaborative conversations, it was decided ADE would use a procurement process to make funds available to the IHEs to pursue accreditation of their early childhood or early childhood special education degree programs.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

In year two, an area that continued to be a challenge was in the recruitment of teachers who met the minimum requirement of possessing at least a Bachelor's degree. In Arizona, there is a significant teacher shortage. According to one source, at the start of the 2016-17 school year, there were 2,041 teacher vacancies (<http://www.abc15.com/news/state/group-arizona-teacher-shortage-reaching-crisis-levels>). In addition to vacant positions, cited in this same source, a survey conducted by the Arizona School Personnel Administrators Administration, found that “47% of teaching positions were vacant or were filled with applications that did not meet the standard teacher requirements. In addition, 465 teachers left their job within the first four weeks of the school year.” For ADE, this crisis was felt even at the preschool level. As a result, in 2016, 396 four year olds were served in classrooms with a teacher who did not meet the minimum requirement of a Bachelor's degree. Since we know the program met all the other elements of the definition of high-quality preschool programming, we allowed early learning providers to use funds to operate their programs and accept children. We did not count these children in our total number of new slots, but we felt this would be a wise investment to, in many cases, help these early learning providers establish preschool classrooms. These discounted slots, however, did impact our overall number.

One of the lessons we learned as a result of our experience with less than qualified teachers is that perhaps we should try a different approach to high-needs community eligibility for participation in the PDG opportunity. In years one and two of the PDG, the data points used to select HNCs were: areas identified with high rates of students receiving free and reduced lunch; areas where more than 25% of the students served identified as being English language learners (ELLs); areas predicted to be serving less than 50% of their capacity based on ADE's K-3 enrollment formula; and lastly, the local education agencies (LEAs) in the HNCs must have earned a C or better on the State's A-F school report system. This yielded ADE a handful of zip codes in which early learning providers may be eligible for participation. Thus, much of the recruitment effort for teachers was placed upon a small number of potential early learning providers. Factors like geographic location and ability to pay a comparable salary to that of the local kindergarten teacher made it difficult for these providers. This prompted the ADE ECE Unit to brainstorm some potential solutions.

As a result, in year three, ADE will use an enhanced list of criteria and a scoring rubric to determine high-needs communities. To establish the list and rubric, ADE assembled a PDG advisory group, made up of current PDG participants and the PDG grant administrator. The group made a recommendation that the list include the following:

- Previous participation in PDG, and in good standing;
- On tribal land;
- Can recruit a teacher with a Bachelor's degree;
- Can recruit a teacher with an ECE or ECSE teaching certificate;
- Located in a rural or underserved area;
- Licensed and in good standing;
- Already enrolled in Quality First, the state's tiered quality improvement rating system

ADE agreed with the recommendation, and added these elements to the original set of criteria used. The goal is to ensure year three of PDG program all children are served in slots that meet the full definition of high-quality preschool programming.

Conclusion

In conclusion, 2016 was a year of many accomplishments for ADE's ECE Unit. We believe the work we did to engage partners for the work prior to and during the writing of our application was well worth the effort. The lessons learned in year one informed the planning for year two, and helped us refine our processes. Our internal and external partnerships continue to be critical to our delivery of services to eligible early learning providers and to their provision of high-quality programming to children and their families. In year two, we continued our efforts to contribute to and fortify Arizona's early childhood infrastructure since it remains critical to our work on sustainability beyond the period of this grant. At the same time, our Early Childhood Program Specialists worked diligently to build new relationships at the local level in each HNC. Since Arizona is a geographically large state, with a wide expanse between HNCs, we found that having a regionally-assigned ECPS has given ADE's ECE Unit a real presence at the local level, and helped programs truly feel supported.