

PSC-ED-OCO

Moderator: Massie Ritsch
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2:00 pm CT

Coordinator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. At this time all participants are in a listen-only mode. After the presentation we'll conduct a question-and-answer session.

Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect at this time. And now I'd like to introduce your host for today's conference, Massie Ritsch.

You may begin.

Massie Ritsch: Thanks, (Jeff), and good afternoon everyone from the U.S. Department of Education here in Washington D.C. We have a terrific announcement today. You probably heard about it. You may have even felt the collective excitement of America and particularly our young learners as they jumped up and down and registered their interest in this program.

We hope everyone is okay. We are all just fine here at the department, excited to talk to you about the announcement we made today about the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. We've got three speakers for you, Roberto Rodriguez, who is the President's Special Assistant for Education on the White House Domestic Policy Council; Jacqueline Jones, who is Secretary Duncan's Senior Advisor on Early Learning; Joan Lombardi, the Deputy Assistant Secretary and the Inter-Departmental Liaison for Early Childhood

Development at Health & Human Services. They will all speak briefly and then we will open the line for your questions.

Let's begin with Roberto.

Roberto Rodriguez: Thank you, Massie. Good afternoon everyone. Thank you all for joining us on this momentous day. Today we're pleased to issue the final criteria and application for the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. This is a historic competition that was developed in partnership between our departments of Education and Health and Human Services.

This \$500 million competition builds upon the extraordinary success of the Race to the Top program. That program unleashed so much education reform and effort to improve elementary and secondary education at the state and local level. We believe that this Early Learning Challenge can have the same kind of impact across some of the core challenges that face the early learning community around our country.

There are four challenges I'd like to frame there. First, how can states ensure consistent standards and common metrics that build towards school readiness across all of our early learning programs regardless of the funding streams that support them?

Second, how can we boost the quality of our early learning development programs and ensure that we're building a quality system in a continuum of quality for all of our programs?

Third, how can states make a meaningful shift to measure outcomes for children rather than just measuring input?

And finally, how do we build the very best possible workforce of early educators to support our children's learning and development?

These four questions shape the final criteria that are being released today, and draft criteria were released for public input as you all know in early July. Our administration received nearly 350 thoughtful comments from around the country, so we've attempted to be responsive to that public input in the final criteria.

We've already heard from dozens of states that are planning to apply, and we hope that they all do because the process of applying under this challenge builds powerful coalitions that will create strong state-wide reform agendas. And we hope that those agendas will pay off down the road whether they're funded as part of this Race to the Top or not.

My colleagues Jacqueline Jones from the Department of Education and Joan Lombardi from the Department of Health and Human Services will walk through some of the details here on our final criteria.

But on behalf of the President, I just want to emphasize how important this program is to our larger effort to prepare all of our children to receive an excellent world-class education from cradle all the way through career.

Now I'll turn it over to Dr. Jacqueline Jones. Jacqueline?

Jacqueline Jones: Thank you, Roberto. And good afternoon everyone.

This program is really all about one thing: making sure that children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. Too many children enter kindergarten and they

are already behind, and that includes many children who are in early learning programs because these programs vary so much in quality.

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge can help transform the quality of early learning programs across the country. The competition criteria aim to establish a comprehensive approach that better coordinate, implement and evaluate high-quality early learning and development programs with a focus on giving families the information they need to select the best programs for their children.

I'm going to repeat some of the things I said in June when we released the draft criteria because the essential elements are unchanged. The first two rounds of Race to the Top were organized around four assurances. This competition is organized around five key levers of change: successful state systems; high-quality accountable programs; promoting early learning and development outcomes for children; a great early childhood education workforce; and finally, measuring outcomes and progress.

Now the bar will be high. And winning states will have to demonstrate a commitment to improving the quality of their early learning and development programs, including those programs funded by the state, by Head Start, Child Care, Title I IDEA, and the like. Winning states will adopt common standards that define what young children should know and be able to do, and common standards that define the quality of programs.

In this context, winning states will also implement appropriate assessment that helps teachers understand how children are progressing. And we need to be clear about the assessment issue.

It is critical for the early childhood workforce to be intentional and systematic in the process of understanding young children's progress in both cognitive and non-cognitive domain. We are asking the states to support early childhood educators so that they have the observation and documentation skills they need to be able to evaluate children's progress along a set of developmentally appropriate early learning and development standards.

We know that good early learning educators are already doing this. They know that assessment is an integral part of teaching. They know that what a child says, what they draw, and how they interact with others constitute the important evidence of early learning. And we want the results of appropriate assessment strategy to be used to improve the quality of instruction and ensure that the needs of all children are being met.

In this competition states will demonstrate commitment to building an early childhood workforce that understands child development, that works with families to implement appropriate instructional strategies, and monitors the progress of children's learning and development. Because next to their parents and families, the most important people in young children's lives are the caregivers and educators with whom they interact every day.

Now a lot of hard work has brought us to this point, and I just want to say how grateful I am to be working in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services in general and with Joan and her team in particular.

Our two agencies have worked very hard to develop a shared vision of success, and we both understand that successful early learning programs are not just about education but about the whole child, their physical and emotional health included.

Joan will now offer some additional details on the program. Joan?

Joan Lombardi: Well, thank you everybody and I hope everyone out there is safe and well. It's a great day, it's a historic day. I want to start by thanking all of you out there for believing in the vision of high quality. I hope that the Early Learning Challenge lives up to your expectations that it helps support all the potential that young children have to thrive and be successful in school and life.

The Early Learning Challenge represents a clear direction, a clear vision. It brings the pieces together. It goes beyond the labels on early childhood (doors) and brings together care and education, pre-schools as well as infants and toddlers. It represents the convergence of health, education, and family. These are the roots of child development.

Just to reinforce, it's a vision for all states, a vision that pays particular attention to the adults in children's lives as we know that the caring adult parents and providers are the key elements to success in the early years. And it suggests the principles behind the Early Learning Challenge have already become a key part of our work, part of the continuum of services that we administer and co-administer, Child Care, Head Start, and Home Visiting.

Improving quality has been a major focus of our child care initiative, and the criteria outlined are reflected in that work. In Head Start, we are looking at the key elements of the system, data, standards, professional development among the other elements and figuring out new ways we can wind our work with the work in the states.

Naturally we believe the Home Visiting Program and other family services lay the foundation for early childhood development success. So all of these pieces, we think, come together in the Early Learning Challenge.

The final criteria we're releasing today spells out many details of the competition including the grant amount which will range starting from \$50 million to \$100 million depending on the state's population of young children from low-income families.

We've posted the final criteria, application, budget spreadsheet, and executive summary on Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Program Web site at education.

In September we'll be holding two TA sessions for state teams. On September 1st, we will hold a WebEx for state teams to do a walkthrough of the application and all its parts. On September 13th, we will have a full-day session with state teams to go in depth and answer any questions. The full-day session will be held in Washington D.C. and broadcast to the ten HHS regions by video teleconference.

The Education and HHS regional folks will be working together to provide the support. Because of capacity issues we're just registering official state teams right now, but we hope to be able to offer any additional space to the public. We'll post information about that on the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Program page on the Education Web site.

Afterwards, the WebEx, video teleconference, and transcripts will be posted on the program page. We've worked really quickly to provide as much time as possible for states to complete the application, which will be due on October 19th. Grants will be awarded before the end of the year and cover a four-year period concluding in 2015.

I'd like to thank the incredible team at the Department of Health and Human Services who've been working so hard over the last few months and also thank my colleagues here at the Department of Education. It has been a wonderful partnership and one that I hope is a model for the states. I hope you go into these partnerships as a good listener and are willing to share ideas and respect each other's point of view. That way children always win.

Both Secretary Sebelius and Secretary Duncan are deeply committed to the success of this effort, and we're all looking forward to the results.

Now we'd be happy to take questions.

Massie Ritsch: Thank you, Joan, thank you, Jacqueline, and thank you, Roberto. Folks, we will take your questions, and just to let you know how you can ask those, if you would like to ask a question please press star 1. To withdraw your question, please press star 2.

Again if you would like to ask a question, please press star 1. And while we wait for questions to queue up I'll let you know that you can find this information on ed.gov, that's e-d-.g-o-v, and our early learning page is specifically ed.gov/early-learning. That's where you'll find the press release from today, the final criteria, all the things that Joan just talked you through.

And again just to remind you of a couple of dates, the Webinar for state teams on September 1st, the full-day in-person and video conference session for state teams on September 13th, and the application itself due on October 19th. We will post our recording and transcript of this call as well as the recordings and transcripts of those other sessions online for folks to check out.

(Jeff), can you take us to our first question?

Coordinator: The first question is from (Dianne Jenkins). Your line is open.

(Dianne Jenkins): Hi. I was just wondering if you could tell me what the funding source and its federal agency is for this grant announcement. And second, if any state, to your knowledge, come close to meeting the bar of this challenge today, in other words would be a good example to look to because they've actually been implementing this on a state-wide basis already.

Joan Lombardi: You know, there's \$500 million available in this grant announcement and, you know, we think that there's states that are in the process of doing many of these things. They're in different places in different states, but we're confident that we're going to get great applications, and there's tremendous enthusiasm, we think, about the competition.

Jacqueline Jones: I just wanted to say we really are grateful to Congress for putting this in the continuing resolution at a time of very difficult financial situation. We had \$900 million in the Race to the Top funds, and so we're really very grateful. Or was it seven...

Roberto Rodriguez: Seven Hundred.

Jacqueline Jones: It was \$700 million in the Race to the Top, and we're really grateful that we have now \$500 million for this competition.

Massie Ritsch: Thanks for the question, (Dianne). (Jeff), who's next?

Coordinator: The next question is from (Richard Garcia). Your line is open.

(Richard Garcia): Yes. My question is in reference to the number of children that are being served in child care settings. The majority of the kids are usually in family, friend, and neighbor care. And I didn't hear that mentioned in the description of childcare providers that would - you know, that we need to look at in terms of improving quality. Is that going to be something that the (readers) or the departments are going to be looking at?

Joan Lombardi: Yes, we think it's a great question and we're very anxious to move forward with quality in all types of settings, and family childcare providers are included in the definition of early childhood programs. We also have, you know, very much interest in family, friends, and neighbors as part of the family system and reaching out and promoting family engagement. So, you know, this is a competition that addresses childcare in a range of settings.

(Richard Garcia): Thank you because it seems to me that family, friend, and neighbor care isn't usually looked at as quality care. And I think we need to start changing that paradigm a little bit because there are some quality family, friend, and neighbor cares out in the world.

Roberto Rodriguez: This competition is really calibrated to that goal, (Richard). Thank you.

(Richard Garcia): Thank you.

Massie Ritsch: Thanks, (Richard). And, folks, if you ask a question it would be helpful if you let us know where you are and any organization you're representing.

(Jeff), who's next?

Coordinator: The next question is from Danny Wells. Your line is open.

Danny Wells: Yes, Danny Wells, Chickasaw Nation, also on the board for the National Indian Head Start Directors Association.

We've had some discussion - I'm kind of concerned that there were no allowances made for American Indian, Alaskan Native groups typically because, you know, state and, as you know, we're fellow (Indians) so there's no allowances made. Are there going to be allowances made for this particular agenda or this entity?

Joan Lombardi: You know, the tribal programs were not included in the mandate that we received, but we are very, very interested in making sure that our tribal partners are very much included in this. You know, both departments run tribal programs. As you know, we run the Tribal Child Care Program, the Tribal Head Start Program. We specifically want to make sure that those programs are fully engaged in the discussions with the states and that the needs of those communities are addressed.

Jacqueline Jones: And, you know, while we can't change this legislation and tribes are not included in the definition of states, we certainly are looking to states to include all of the early learning programs and ascertaining that those programs in tribal settings are right there and appropriate to be included in this work.

Danny Wells: I hope - and that's - and I think my (board)'s just follow the case. I think most boards will be willing to do that. But you have a little deeper issue where you have federal institutes working with a state entity, particularly when you have some differences in rules and regulations that we have to abide by. So again, I'm just kind of most concerned that that was not included in legislation.

Danny Wells: Thank you.

Massie Ritsch: Thank you.

Coordinator: The next question is from Sharon Darling. Your line is open.

Sharon Darling: All right, this is Sharon Darling with the National Center for Family Literacy. I was just getting ready to opt out because my question also was around tribes. We work in 46 (unintelligible) and reservations across the country and, you know, the Child Care, the Head Start, the FACES Program, Family Education Program, there's really such a need.

And I understand that the legislation didn't include that and so was pleased to hear the answer that, you know, they would be included in any kind of discussion. And I hope that there'll be some thought to how we can even make that stronger and what we could do individually on the tribes at the child level and in the Bureau of Schools.

Joan Lombardi: Yes, I also think that we have tried to address that issue in reaching out to the associations that represented tribal communities to make sure that they are involved in the states and as key stakeholders.

Massie Ritsch: Thank you, Sharon.

Sharon Darling: Thank you.

Coordinator: The next question is from Barbara Minzenberg. Your line is open.

Barbara Minzenberg: Thank you for taking my question. In the original or the draft RFP, there was no mention of the (fifth lever) measuring outcomes and progress. And I assume that's a program evaluation piece, and I wonder if you could address that a little bit for us.

Jacqueline Jones: Well, actually, Barbara, and hi...

Barbara Minzenberg: Hi.

Jacqueline Jones: I hope you're doing well in Pennsylvania. It's another area. However, when you look carefully under that area it is not new. We have moved data and the kindergarten assessment is into that area so it's not a new piece of work. It's simply a way in which we've reorganized some of the criteria.

Barbara Minzenberg: Thank you.

Massie Ritsch: Thank you.

Coordinator: The next question is from (Bonnie Boicamer). Your line is open.

Tracy Yee: Hi. This is actually Tracy Yee. I'm calling from Washington State. I have two questions one you may have answered already. We'd like you to summarize what you think the major changes are from the final application to the preliminary.

And also we wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the panels that would be reviewing these grants, what the makeup of them are, et cetera. Thank you.

Jacqueline Jones So we had over 300 comments and we thank you all for being actively engaged in looking at that first set of draft criteria. I think we got lots of comments from folks who were very happy about the comprehensive nature of this program. We know that early childhood programs are complicated and require a comprehensive perspective.

In that vein we also got comments indicating that there was a lot to do, a lot to do for the funding that was being offered. And so one of the major things we've done is to, we think, provide flexibility. So when you start to read carefully you'll see that we have areas that are called focus investment areas and there is choice.

And so while each of those focus investment areas needs to be hit, you do have choices of the criteria that you'll select in those areas. And so we tried to make it so that it is a program that is comprehensive, that reaches all the early care settings. On the other hand, realizing that the states are in very different places, we've tried to tailor this so that you can be able write an application that meets you where you are.

Joan Lombardi: Yes. I think, you know, there were also obviously concerns about, you know, the amount of resources that this will take. And, you know, we've addressed that in two ways. One, we've really put a lot of emphasis on leveraging other resources, and secondly, we restructured this to give a little bit more flexibility by allowing more choice in the focus investment areas, which are the three areas promoting early learning and development outcomes, the workforce, and measuring outcomes and progress.

So we tried to put some more flexibility in the final criteria because precisely of these concerns that we heard.

And as to the peer reviewer question, the department is now in the process of identifying external expert reviewers to evaluate the applications. Career staff from the department will serve as panel managers but will not score the application or participate in the discussion with the peer reviewers.

But we have - we hope a pool of potential reviewers who will indicate whether or not they have experience. We really want to get folks from a broad range of expertise in the early childhood area. As you all know, this is a complicated area. We have lots of folks out there we think will be really important to have their perspective and to see the ways in which they work in the field and the expertise they can bring.

So we're looking right now for peer reviewers and we hope to be able to have folks who will be working with the department staff to evaluate the criteria in the application.

Massie Ritsch: Thanks for the question, Tracy. (Jeff), who's next?

Coordinator: The next question is from (Mimi Gram). Your line is open.

(Mimi Gram): Never mind. I found the answer in their guidance. Thank you.

Roberto Rodriguez: Perfect.

Massie Ritsch: Next.

Coordinator: The next question is from Andy Gomm. Your line is open.

Andy Gomm: Hi good afternoon everybody. This is Andy Gomm with New Mexico Part C Early Intervention. Joan, you made a quick reference to what I think is being called the Technical Assistance Planning Workshop on September 13th. Could you speak a little bit more to what you're looking for from state planning teams in terms of composition and whether families are included in that, and then a little bit about what you're hoping teams would get out of participating in that day?

Joan Lombardi: You know, we have not outlined who should be on the planning team. We think that it will vary across the states. And we think that you should make those choices in those calls.

Jacqueline Jones: Every state is going to be different so we hope you will be able to decide who in your state is most appropriate.

Andy Gomm: Okay. Is there a maximum?

Jacqueline Jones: It's an all-day session by the way.

Andy Gomm: I'm sorry. Quick follow-up question. Is there a maximum number of participants per state?

Jacqueline Jones: Five. We're thinking that five folks from each state. That would be good.

Andy Gomm: Okay, okay.

Andy Gomm: And who is the lead within a state that determines who the team...

Joan Lombardi: The governor.

Jacqueline Jones: The governor decides.

Andy Gomm: The governor, okay. I just wanted to make that clear for everybody.

Massie Ritsch: Thank you for your question, Andy.

Coordinator: The next question is from Amy O'Leary. Your line is open.

Amy O'Leary: Hi. We were wondering about the kindergarten readiness assessment, and is the vision that all children will be assessed or a sampling of children?

Jacqueline Jones: You know, the goal of this assessment is to give states a sense of where children are across a broad range of domains, cognitive and non-cognitive, when they enter kindergarten. And so how this is done is going to be up to the states and we are really looking for assessments that take into consideration the target population, look across the broad range of domains.

We try to really make sure that we communicate that we want sound assessments that are appropriate. This is not an easy task, we know, but we are leaving it up to the states to come to us with good ideas about how this should be done and how this can be best implemented in their state.

Joan Lombardi: You know, I think, Amy, that we're really concerned about that we want to make sure that these are broadly defined, that they address the essential domains of development, and we don't end up with just, you know, a kindergarten entry assessment that (is) narrowly defined on domains, and I think that's probably one important point and obviously that they are definitely reliable.

Jacqueline Jones: And I think we've felt so strongly about this that we have within the definition -- and there's a huge section on definitions that we really want you to take a look at -- we've identified what we mean by these essential domains of school readiness and we want you to take a look at that and be sure that that's clear. Because we really do mean the broad range of domains.

Amy O'Leary: Thank you.

Massie Ritsch: Thanks, Amy. (Jeff), we probably have time for two more questions.

Coordinator: The next question is from Pat Trotter. Your line is open.

Pat Trotter: Thank you. Pat Trotter from state of Kentucky. Just a follow-up on the assessment. In the initial guidelines that came out there was a mention that there should be a single assessment in place by 2015, but we don't see that in the current guidelines. So have you sort of moved away from expecting the state to commit to having a single readiness assessment?

Jacqueline Jones: I think it's still there.

Joan Lombardi: Yes. It says that - administered no later than the start of the school year 2014-2015 to children entering public school kindergarten. I should point out that we also go on to say that states may propose a state implementation plan that forms the basis for a broader state-wide implementation.

Pat Trotter: Okay. So you are still hoping that we are leaning towards establishing a single assessment across the state?

Jacqueline Jones: Okay, let's be clear. This is a common assessment around kindergarten entry. It is not a single assessment that will tell us everything about what children know and - so it's a kindergarten entry measure to tell us the status of children when they enter kindergarten. There are lots of things that go into figuring out what children know and what they're able to do.

Pat Trotter: Okay. Thank you.

Massie Ritsch: Thanks, Pat. Let's take one more question.

Coordinator: The next question is from Jessica Sutter. Your line is open.

Jessica Sutter: Hi, Jessica Sutter from the Office of the Deputy Mayor in Washington D.C. I just want to follow up on the all-day Technical Assistance session. I believe we were required RSVP by yesterday. So I sent in a panel of names. I'm curious to see if I'm going to be given any flexibility in substituting names if and when we get more information about the day's agenda because that may help decide which members of the state leadership team are best suited to be present.

Jacqueline Jones: That's fine. Absolutely, you have flexibility with that.

Jessica Sutter: Wonderful. Okay, thank you.

Joan Lombardi: And since we have a question that comes from Washington, Jessica, I hope everyone is safe and sound today.

Jessica Sutter: Thank you. We were evacuated from City Hall, but I'm sitting at the JW Marriott which is open for business.

Joan Lombardi: I wanted to just end my remarks by thanking an incredible team of people across the two departments: Jennifer Tschantz, Beth Caron, Steven Hicks, Richard Gonzales, Ngozi Onunaku), and we've been recently been joined by Miriam Calderon at HHS who will also be working on this.

And so many other people. The hours that people put in, the dedication, and we know that it's, you know, a big lift for all of you out there as school starts and you're busy. And we just appreciate all the dedication that you've already put in and you will be putting in, in the next few weeks.

Jacqueline Jones: I just want to add that this is not easy, the bar is high. But we really hope that everybody who participates in this process will really get something out of it; that you'll come together and you'll better understand the status of children, you'll better understand the programs, and you'll come to a way in which you can really help to align these programs in the service of improving quality for all children.

Massie Ritsch: Thank you, Jacqueline, and Joan, and Roberto. Thank you all for participating in the call this afternoon. Again you can find all this information on ed.gov., that's e-d-.g-o-v. We'll look forward to engaging with the state teams again on September 1st for a Webinar and then on the 13th for that whole day of technical assistance. And, of course, receiving those applications by October 19th.

Until next time, thanks, and have a great rest of your day.

Roberto Rodriguez: Thanks everyone.

Coordinator: This concludes today's conference call. You may now disconnect.

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