

Bridge Event Webinar Transcript: Leading the Way: How States Are Addressing Early Learning Under ESSA

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Michigan and Louisiana Presentations Transcript

Lori Connors-Tadros: *Slide #1:* Thank you and we are going to now turn to Richard Lower, the Director of Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning, Office of Great Start at the Michigan Department of Education, a very valued colleague who's taken a very thoughtful approach to engaging with colleagues internal to Michigan and outside to develop their state plan. So Richard, I'll turn it over to you.

Richard Lower: *Slide #2:* Thank you, Lori, and thank you to everyone. I appreciate being included in this webinar. I do want to say that leading the way in ESSA did take preparation. I don't want an illusion that it was something that could be quickly incorporated so that there is no false sense throughout the country of what they can achieve. But I think there are some pieces to share that really no matter where you're at in the process of your early education and care system development that can apply, and so I intend to share that in my presentation. But I do want to set the foundation a little bit for what contributed to the opportunity for early childhood to be so prevalent in the Michigan plan under ESSA, and that really started back in 2011 when our current governor, Rick Snyder, established the Office of Great Start within the Michigan Department of Education. It consolidated

the existing Early Education Office with Childcare and Human Services and the Head Start Collaboration Office. But more importantly, the governor in that executive order set a vision and so that early childhood outcome was at the forefront of the mind for all public investment and that these four items you see on the screen are absolutely at the core of every decision made around policy and funding resources.

More importantly is that beyond the governor's leadership, there was a wealth of support across the state. The Children's Leadership Council of Michigan is a consortium of business leaders and they, understanding all of the research that came out of the 1990s and 2000s and so forth, continue to understand that this is our future workforce, these children that we need to invest in early. So they absolutely had interest in preschool child care and most importantly the prenatal to the age three support. That, coupled with in Michigan we are fortunate to have a publicly funded longitudinal evaluation of our state preK program, the Great Start Readiness Program. That, from 1995 to 2011 longitudinal study pretty much solidified the legislative interest in early childhood by showing that without a doubt quality early childhood can have an impact on reducing retention in K-12, reducing special ed placement, increasing academic performance, and reducing high school dropout. So these pieces together absolutely allowed the staff at the Michigan Department of Education Early Childhood to have a bigger presence in many K-12 initiatives, both within the department as well as outside the department.

Slide #3: So that was six years of laying a foundation. Simultaneously, we had opportunity obviously within the last four to six months of thinking about this upcoming ESSA state plan and what we are going to do for embedding early childhood since we had the public support. It was a regular topic of conversation under our previous governor, Governor Granholm, as well as continuing with our current governor, and more importantly there has been a consistency for the past three, minimally, if not four state superintendents that there was a recognition for early learning and care as part of the continuum of a student's educational trajectory.

So what did we do in Michigan as early childhood staff is we over the last couple of years cultivated linkages to set the stage for this ESSA state plan, and we realized the opportunity within the ESSA framework as a mechanism for achieving greater connection across these four areas in our department that we had a little bit of opportunity and success in around professional preparation, teacher certification, curriculum, assessment and more school time and culture. But the ESSA state plan absolutely is a mechanism to propel us forward and catalyze quicker integration, alignment and collaboration.

Also with the establishment of the Office of Great Start, we had a blueprint that we put together called Great Start, Great Investment, Great Future, in which that really documented an understanding that we have 89 different funding programs across all state government that touch early childhood at a total allocation of \$9.4 billion. So it was really that piece of a policy document that was just laying out in black and white helping to show that we are not a by-load community of early childhood. We are an integrated community in many different ways. All of these pieces helped leverage Michigan's opportunity to have a solid footprint in the ESSA state plan.

Michigan's Top Ten in Ten Vision is under our current state superintendent, Brian Whiston, in which a whole yearlong stakeholder process established a vision of moving Michigan back into the top ten in education performance states because we've fallen over the decade. As part of that, there are seven goals and again, early childhood is integrated into almost all of the goals. All of these pieces really reframed the concept of early childhood as a vital aspect of education, to reestablish education as a P-20, with P meaning prenatal in Michigan, from early childhood to postsecondary.

Slide #4: So what were the actual strategies we used? One of the pieces as Lori explained, there are three primary policy areas within the ESSA act and those three areas, I have reworded them slightly, but expanding access to quality, ensuring alignment, and supporting educators. We developed a working integration implementation, kind of white paper. It was short but it was distinct. We utilized for each one of these areas for our colleagues across the department a summary of what ESSA speaks to, what is allowed, what is required. Then we outlined specifically how it relates to early childhood.

Then the most important piece was that we provide specific proposed policy. We had to bridge the K-12 early childhood jargon barrier to be able to showcase that many of the practices of quality standards that we would like to see in early childhood are exactly what is happening, but is called something else in K-12. By making sure that the jargon didn't get in the way, we took it upon ourselves to actually change our vocabulary so that we were more readily accepted at the table with our ideas. By having the very specific examples, it really helped to illustrate and showcase the concept and it was received in a much better manner.

Slide #5: These are the five pieces that I want to highlight across primarily the three sections of the state plan around early educators or supporting educators, around alignment, and around quality. So expanding access was important. I mentioned that. Promoting blending and braiding, this was really to break down a siloed approach that program by program by program does not, should not dictate how we think about an early

childhood or early elementary system. It really needs to be about focusing on the child's outcome and how we blend and braid funding to leverage both state and federal dollars, and that goes to the coordinated comprehensive needs assessment. To understand how and what we are going to deliver to the students, we need to understand what's in the life of a student in those communities. So in a comprehensive needs assessment, we are working toward helping to form guidance around a community needs assessment so that it really takes the whole child into account and the whole community. So that's another area that we have embedded into the state plan with early childhood. Effective transitions are an essential key to success for connections between early childhood and K-12 as well as supporting the workforce and really understanding that we can do a whole lot under in particular Title II to be able to support educators as well as administrators in joint professional learning so that there is continuity and alignment.

Slide #6: I would just like to say that from my perspective, as you see on the screen all my flags on our state plan, our plan was framed in a whole child approach. To me that is a huge success. Getting the whole Department of Education to recognize the importance of social and emotional learning, of nutrition, of physical activity, and not just academic was a huge win for the theme of this plan. Moreover, you can see at least 24 pages of the document had something related to early childhood mentioned and four additional pages had developmentally appropriate practices mentioned. To me, this is how I define success that we had over 20 percent of the document have a reference to early childhood in some way.

Slides #7-9: My advice for state leaders and others on the call are to be bold with your ideas. Put down the nitty-gritty if that's how you need to conceptualize it first, and refine from there, but don't limit yourself too early by saying, I don't know how to translate this idea into something that's appropriate for a state level plan. Prepare bridging examples. It's to be able to get over that jargon divide between early childhood and K-12. So understand, if you don't want to use developmentally appropriate practice, go ahead and use another phrase that would complement. Then ultimately, start to think about how you're going to prepare an implementation of those ideas as the process for approval happens through this U.S. Department Ed. So with that, I want to thank you for your time and I hand it off to....

Lori Connors-Tadros: **Slide #10:** You can hand it off to me first. Thank you so much, Richard, and we will have again, we're going to go through each of the states. We'll have a short presentation to provide us an overview. We have built in about 15 to 20 minutes for a discussion among them, and so get your questions ready to follow up. Now I'm really pleased to invite Jenna Conway, assistant superintendent of early childhood at the Louisiana

Department of Education, to share Louisiana's approach to embedding early learning really in their ESSA plan that draws on an amazing commitment to a very unified system of early childhood, birth through graduation. So Jenna, I'll turn it over to you. Thank you.

Jenna Conway:

Slide #11: Thanks, Lori. Again, I'm Jenna Conway, assistant superintendent for early childhood for the Louisiana Department of Education, and what I'd like to present to everybody this afternoon is the Louisiana vision. As Lori noted, much of our work around ESSA, not to say it was easy in terms of planning, but was made easier by work over the course of the last five years to unify all publicly funded early childhood programs in Louisiana. I just wanted to give you a sense of the five essential elements that we consider key to this effort, and then talk briefly about how we're integrating this work, this ongoing work into our ESSA plan.

Slide #12: So Louisiana five years ago passed a law that basically called on unifying all publicly funded child care, Head Start, Early Head Start and preK programs into one statewide early childhood network in order to prepare all children for kindergarten. So we could think about this in various ways but at its core, we basically say regardless of the name on the outside of the building or the funding source that we have high standards for what children should learn and what excellent teaching looks like, whether it's an 18-month-old or a three-year-old or a four-year-old, and that our teachers are excellent at interacting with children and guiding learning.

We think this means in order to make this work for providers and to focus on what's happening in the classroom that there are consistent expectations for health, safety and learning and that we ultimately are gearing the system kind of to focus in our case, really on interactions and instruction in the classroom, and then rewarding programs that serve children well. At the same time, we think parents deserve the best information about what is occurring in classrooms, what's likely to occur in terms of interactions and instruction, and so making sure that we can give them that information, whether you're North Louisiana, South Louisiana, wherever you might be, and that they can easily enroll and choose the best options for their children, so really trying to encompass every aspect of our early childhood system.

Slide #13: Specifically, we have then sort of passed these laws that have put us in place for the transformation. Before we talk about ESSA, I think it's important to kind of understand how these elements are in place. So the first of which is we have a statewide network of local community networks, and so all of our parishes, our counties under our guidance have voluntarily established local networks that include every single, if you take a single dollar of subsidy, a single Head Start dollar, a single public

preK dollar, every single one of those sites has to participate and has to join locally with all of its other partners to count every birth to five at-risk child, provide two CLASS observations for every classroom and to implement and coordinate in enrolment.

We have established in Louisiana a unified rating system, so again child care, head start and preK that focuses on giving parents that information on the experiences that children are having in their program and that everybody has to participate. Failure to participate can result in losing public funding or your license. I'll talk a little bit more about that in a second.

Along with that, sort of making sure we're measuring everybody and we're focusing on what's happening in classrooms. Again as I said before, we're working to put in place locally managed enrolment systems that coordinate information, eligibility in applications and match families with their highest ranked preference. So we've got Head Start, child care and preK school districts in every community working together to count kids, implement CLASS observations, be a part of this rating system, and make enrolment work better for families.

We've also realized that kind of an important role that the state can play in terms of leveling the playing field across this is by a real focus on what's happening in terms of teacher preparation. So in addition to kind of streamlining regulations, looking at funding issues which then in turn helps address compensation concerns, we've also tried to raise the bar on what's expected for child care teachers and working closely with the field to do that at a pace and a cost that they can afford. So we've established a new master's degree teaching certificate but we've made a piece of that the first three courses an ancillary certificate or what we call CDA Plus which will by 2019 be the minimum expectation for all of our child care teachers. Then we're supporting them to earn credentials through kind of a variety of programs. We'll talk about it in a second.

Lastly, what makes all of this possible is centralized oversight at the state level. So with the exception of IDEA Part C, every other aspect of the early childhood system has moved to the Department of Education so we can work in a coordinated fashion and in a sort of more nimble and streamlined fashion to support the field to achieve greater kindergarten readiness for kids.

Slide #14: So the key piece of this, and I think is important as I know states are grappling with, well, how should I think about accountability, whether that's kind of in early elementary or early childhood or some combination of both, and much of our work has been informed by what was this sort of statutory requirement to create this unified rating system. It's not optional, it is required, and again as I said, we have roughly 1,600

sites which include every single preK in a school setting, every single Head Start and Early Head Start and every single child care center that serves even one subsidy kid or is willing to serve a subsidy child.

So we rolled out over the course of three years a unified rating improvement system that really has two core components, the first of which is a rating that's based on positive child outcomes with the best proxy for using that is in the CLASS system of measures, and the second of which is information on classroom best practices. So rather than include things like teacher credentials that end up, we know there's sort of good research but mixed research in terms of kid outcomes and are out of reach for many of our child care settings right now. What we decided to do is make our ratings solely based on a series of CLASS observations both done locally and by the third party. Then the other elements of things like credentials, use of assessment, use of curriculum ratios, are all non-rated informational metrics.

We were able to roll this out statewide to observe 99 percent of our classrooms both in the fall and the spring using the CLASS system of measures, and I wanted just to share this graph in terms of when you have more of a singular focus, it actually enables you to differentiate more in terms of what kids are actually experiencing. So basically, what you first see here if you look at the purple line which is child care setting, the orange which is Early Head Start and Head Start, and then the aqua which is schools, as you might imagine you've got schools, the vast majority of which are scoring kind of on the high end of the curve, roughly about a 4.5 if you take an average of all the three or five CLASS measures, depending on other things, preK and toddler. What you see is sort of Head Start in the middle and child care on the end. So that makes sense when you think of some of the things higher credentials, higher compensation, more resources into the preK setting.

On the other hand though, you still see quite a wide differentiation. So we don't, we're not saying that all schools are the same or all child cares are the same. In fact we have some schools that, excuse me, some child care centers that even with fewer resources and lower credentialed teachers that are scoring higher than schools. Head Start is scoring higher than schools and vice versa. So by rolling out this system that really allows for more differentiation, although we still use just sort of four general ratings right now, but more numerical differentiation, really is sort of achieving two things, one of which is really letting us kind of force some questions around how do we get parents to focus on what's happening in a program and get the system geared towards that rather than just sitting on the outside of the building. The second of which is really getting all of our programs, even if they have some of these high-quality inputs such as a bachelor's degree teacher, how do you still look at what's occurring in that classroom, what's happening for kids and how to improve this, so a real

good wake-up call for many of our preK programs for instance that were on the lower end of that curve and saying to them, okay, what is it you need to do different even though you have eight of the ten for instance national benchmarks.

So that's a bit of a preview on our accountability system and I think if people are interested in knowing that, this has been pretty exciting for the state and has really started to shape some of our thoughts about even accountability in early elementary in terms of what is beyond inappropriately testing kids, how can you put some real measures and get focus on what kids are experiencing in a way that if you look at the national research on CLASS ends up with kids having better outcomes.

I should also do a little plug here that we had researchers from the University of Virginia apply for a federal grant, came down and tested our kids, and the kids who actually were in classrooms in Louisiana with higher CLASS scores did better on both the literacy and math indicators, so they're kind of using those assessments. So again, please feel free to email me or ask questions if there's more to find on that, but kind of a very different take on accountability and early childhood in Louisiana and it's going to be a core piece of this broader, unified system.

Slide #15: Now let's take a moment and talk briefly about ESSA. So rather than treat early childhood entirely separately, what we have been doing is working along with our K–12 counterparts to make sure that the early childhood elements, the Unified Early Childhood System in Louisiana is integrated throughout. So when we talk about fundamental expectations for students and graduates' struggles, a lot of this routes back to, okay, how do we make sure every child has access to a high-quality early childhood program? When we think about a strong educator profession, we don't just think about bachelor's degree teachers, we think about all of our childcare teachers and we call them that, teachers or educators, and how we make sure that there's a robust set of experience for them to prepare them to be effective in their childcare classroom.

So what we are doing in Louisiana in addition to having laid out a framework with our plan is also working to unify our planning process for every school system, so really trying to kind of get them to take a step back, reflect on results, look at where there are strengths, where there are challenges, to lay out a plan using kind of best practices and research nationally and to then apply for those federal funds so that instead of thinking of Title I as an afterthought, that's fully integrated into their work.

Slides #16–18: And this gives you a sense of how that timeline will work. I should also note as I wrap up that this is made easier by our work of having community networks. So what I didn't say earlier is by having an

early childhood community network that includes every single child care, Head Start and preK in Louisiana, it means that many of our school systems have switched from K or preK-to-12 systems to truly birth-to-12 systems where they consider every single one of their feeder programs whether it's child care or Head Start as partners in preparing kids for kindergarten and for success. Lori, with that said, I'll turn it to you.

Lori Connors-Tadros: Thank you so much, and we actually will talk a little bit more about that as we do have a question that once we have all of the states present, we'll go into that. We'll look more at effective practices for coordination and alignment from the state to school districts, so we'll look forward to hearing more about that. Of course, Louisiana has a very unique structure because of all of the early childhood birth-to-5 funding and programs are integrated within the Department of Education. As you can see, the governance and the funding of states does impact the scope of your both foundational work and the way you're able to integrate that within the ESSA plan.

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