

Spotlight on Georgia's Project LITTLE

(Lifting Infants and Toddlers through Language-rich Environments)

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Overview

In early 2017, Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) was awarded \$2 million in funding from the governor of Georgia to be used for infant/toddler (I/T) language and literacy activities. DECAL used this funding to create Project LITTLE (Lifting Infants and Toddlers Through Language-rich Environments).¹ Project LITTLE was designed with the goal of supporting and fostering early language and literacy among infants and toddlers through a variety of coaching and professional development supports for I/T providers over a two-year period. Project LITTLE was also created with the goal of developing an I/T workforce pipeline that helps teachers advance their knowledge and skills while improving the quality of education for infants and toddlers across the state of Georgia.

Following a six-month planning process, DECAL launched Project LITTLE in August 2017. The first cohort of Project LITTLE included 13 early childhood education (ECE) centers in targeted counties across the state that received support during the 2017-18 and 2018-2019 fiscal years. Counties were identified using data on selected risk factors including child poverty, unemployment, premature birth rates, and chronically failing schools serving elementary-age children.

Project LITTLE is now in its third year of implementation. The second cohort (30 ECE centers) of Project LITTLE began receiving support during the 2018-19 school year, and the third cohort (40 ECE centers) began receiving support during the current 2019-20 school year. Currently, Project LITTLE supports approximately 400 I/T teachers across the state of Georgia.

Project LITTLE grant requirements

To apply for Project LITTLE, centers must meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Have a 2- or 3- star rating in Quality Rated, Georgia's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS)
- Participate in the Georgia's Pre-K program
- Be located in one of 27 targeted counties²

¹ Project LITTLE was originally called the Early Language and Literacy Classroom (ELLC) grant. The name was changed to Project LITTLE in 2019.

² This was a requirement for the first year of Project LITTLE, but is no longer a requirement.

If accepted to Project LITTLE, centers must:

- Identify a staff member (ideally a current I/T teacher) to serve as the peer coach to provide full-time coaching and support to I/T teachers at the center. This peer coach must be paid a minimum of \$15 per hour in their new role (funded by Project LITTLE funds).
- Utilize LENA³ (Language ENVironment Analysis) Grow software in their I/T classrooms to measure talk and speech patterns weekly. LENA data are collected by having each child in the classroom wear a vest with a built-in recorder that tracks their speech throughout the day, across a 12-week period.
- Undergo two Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS⁴) observations each year. During CLASS observations, a certified observer comes into an I/T classroom to observe and document teacher-child interactions.

Professional development supports

All centers participating in Project LITTLE receive a variety of professional development supports and opportunities, including:

- Weekly coaching sessions between the I/T specialist and the peer coach, which includes classroom observations
- Peer coach's data-informed coaching of I/T teachers, using data from LENA and CLASS observations
- Monthly center-based professional learning communities (PLCs) for all I/T staff, led by an I/T specialist
- Monthly Literacy Leadership Forum trainings for peer coaches and directors at all participating centers, focused on developing their coaching and supervisory skills, respectively
- Quarterly Early Language and Literacy Institute trainings for all teachers, peer coaches, and directors at participating centers, focused on early language and literacy instruction⁵

Funding

After receiving \$2 million from the governor of Georgia in 2017 for the first year of Project LITTLE implementation, DECAL received \$2.3 million in the second year to support an increased number of centers across the state. Currently, Project LITTLE is primarily funded through the Georgia Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), in addition to receiving funds from the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy.

Funds to participating centers are dispersed quarterly. Centers must identify a minimum of two classrooms to participate in the grant. Funding is calculated as a base rate per center plus additional funding per classroom participating. In the last three years, centers have received between \$30,700 and \$80,000, depending on the number of participating classrooms. Centers are required to use Project LITTLE funds to cover the peer coach's salary and benefits and costs for travel to trainings. Programs must also spend a minimum of \$2,000 on books and other language and literacy supplies for each classroom. Additional funds can be used, with DECAL approval, for purchasing additional early language and literacy supplies or furniture for the I/T classrooms, supporting an I/T teacher to pursue a higher credential or degree (e.g., a Child Development Associate credential), or sending staff to additional trainings or conferences related to

³ <https://www.lena.org/>

⁴ <https://teachstone.com/class/>; ELLC used a version of the CLASS created and validated for an infant or toddler classroom (Toddler CLASS and Infant CLASS).

⁵ Literacy Leader Forums and Early Language and Literacy Institutes provide content for centers in their second year of Project LITTLE that builds on the content from the first year.

early language and literacy. Centers work with their assigned I/T specialist to plan how to spend the grant funds and are required to reconcile the funds at the end of each year.

Project LITTLE grant staffing

Project LITTLE is staffed and implemented by a number of employees at DECAL, including:

- A program manager who oversees and implements Project LITTLE
- Fourteen I/T specialists who each support an average of four participating centers
- Two supervisors who manage the I/T specialists

Successes and Challenges

Successes

DECAL reports that the major success of Project LITTLE thus far has been the positive feedback received from teachers and directors about the professional development trainings and the impact these trainings have had on staff. Participating in this program has reportedly raised teachers' awareness of their teaching practices, and ultimately led to increased and improved interactions with children in their classrooms.

Given the success of the professional development trainings in the first year of the project, DECAL decided to adapt and expand the trainings to meet the continued needs of the 13 centers participating in Project LITTLE for their second year. For example, the content for the Literacy Leader Forums and Early Language and Literacy Institute in the second year was tailored and updated to expand upon the content from the first year. Additionally, all teachers now have access to a *MyTeachstone*⁶ account, where they can access and share trainings and resources, and receive feedback and suggested resources from their peer coach and I/T specialist based on their CLASS and LENA data.

Challenges

Staff turnover at participating centers has posed significant challenges for Project LITTLE. These challenges include orienting new staff to the grant requirements (e.g., using and interpreting LENA data, CLASS observations) and finding creative ways to catch them up on content from previous trainings on early language and literacy. In the long term, DECAL hopes that Project LITTLE will help incentivize teachers to stay at their centers, ultimately decreasing staff turnover.

During the first year of implementation, Project LITTLE also experienced challenges in gaining buy-in from teachers and managing their expectations about the project. In some cases, directors at centers applied for Project LITTLE without consulting or informing teachers at their center, which led to some challenges in getting teachers to see the value of the project requirements and professional development opportunities associated with the grant. DECAL made multiple adjustments for the second year of the project to address this challenge. For example, at the start of each program year, directors at participating centers are encouraged to hold a kick-off meeting with teachers to explain Project LITTLE and their rationale for applying. Additionally, DECAL adjusted the content of the PLCs, dedicating the first PLC to describing the grant expectations and professional development opportunities, and spending time developing relationships between the I/T specialist and the center staff.

⁶ <https://teachstone.com/>

Next Steps

DECAL intends to continue Project LITTLE using CCDF funds. In future cohorts of Project LITTLE, DECAL hopes to continue to expand the reach of the program by supporting additional centers.

In spring 2019, DECAL piloted Project LITTLE with 15 family child care (FCC) providers over a six-month period. These FCC providers received supports similar to those that the centers received through Project LITTLE, but supports were tailored to meet the specific needs of FCC homes. DECAL plans to apply lessons learned from the pilot to plan for future Project LITTLE participation by FCC providers.

Additional Information

For additional information on Project LITTLE:

- Visit this website: <http://dec.al.ga.gov/InstructionalSupports/EarlyLanguageandLiteracy.aspx>
- Listen to this podcast: <http://decaldownload.buzzsprout.com/211637/1480279-episode-50-project-little>

Project Overview

This project aims to understand how state policies, funding, and practices support the strengthening of the early childhood education (ECE) workforce.

The purpose of this series of “Spotlights” is to highlight strategies and initiatives being implemented by state and local agencies designed to support the development of the ECE workforce.

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