



Early Ed Watch

A Blog from New America's Early Education Initiative

About i3 Validation and Development 'Early Learning' Grantees, Part 1

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Last month, the U.S. Department of Education announced the highest-rated applicants for its Investing in Innovation (i3) competitive grant program. Thirteen of the 49 winners signaled that early learning was an area of focus for their proposals.

At that time, the proposals in the "scale-up" category were the only ones available to the public. Now the department has made the highest-rated applications for "validation" and "development" grants public as well.

(The winners are designated as "highest-rated" because they do not become official grantees until securing the required matching funds. [All 49 "highest-rated" applicants are now one step closer to being official i3 grantees, as they have met the match requirement.](#))

In a previous post, *Early Ed Watch* discussed the early learning plans of the i3 scale-up winners and [uncovered some scoring anomalies](#). Those problems raised questions about fairness and proposal readers' understanding of what the department required from applicants who included early learning to receive an extra "competitive priority" point. Three out of four – KIPP Foundation, Success for All Foundation, and Teach for America – included early learning as a competitive priority, but we determined that only TFA had a significant focus on early learning as defined in the application.

For the validation grants, the department had said it would fund up to \$30 million to validate a practice, strategy or program that exhibits moderate evidence of effectiveness. Applicants for development grants could receive up to \$5 million to grow a practice, strategy or program that has been attempted previously, by the applicant or another organization, and showed promising results.

Before going any further, we want to thank and recognize the Department of Education for making this information available to the public on its [website](#) and on [data.ed.gov](#). The transparency is welcome (and the interactive maps and graphs on [data.ed.gov](#) are almost addictive to data nerds like us).

To begin, below is the list of validation and development winners with links to their narratives:

Applicant	Project Title	Type	Funding Requested
Apple Tree Institute for Education Innovation (Washington, D.C.)	Every Child Ready	Development	\$5,000,000
ASSET Inc. (Pittsburgh, PA)	ASSET Regional Professional Development Centers for Advancing STEM Education	Validation	\$22,308,433
Boys and Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee	The Milwaukee Community Literacy Project	Development	\$4,142,965
Erikson Institute (Chicago, IL)	Achieving High Standards for Pre-K-Grade 3 Mathematics: A Whole Teacher approach to Professional Development	Development	\$4,999,993
Los Angeles Unified School District	L.A.'s Bold Competition -- Turning Around and Operating Its Low-Performing Schools	Development	\$4,880,392
Montgomery County Public Schools (Bethesda, MD)	North Star	Development	\$4,999,634
Parents as Teachers National Center	Improving Educational Outcomes for American	Validation	\$14,253,165

(St. Louis, MO)	Indian Children		
St. Vrain Valley School District (Longmont, CO)	Saint Vrain Valley School District i3 Project	Development	\$3,608,880
School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida	Florida Master Teacher Initiative	Development	\$5,000,000
Utah State University	New Mexico K-3 Plus Extended School Year Validation Study	Validation	\$15,282,720

Just as we did with the scale-up winners, we looked at whether the highest-rated applicants were actually awarded the competitive priority point or not. And, once again, we couldn't tell. Each of the official readers – three per application for the competitive priority, five in total – did mark a '0' or a '1,' on the applications, depending on their view of how well the applicant met the department's criteria for addressing early learning. But we still don't know the bottom-line score that synthesizes the readers' assessments. (In a phone call following the announcement of the highest-rated applicants, the Department said they would post a spreadsheet explaining the synthesis of scores, but as far as we can tell, it's not posted yet.)

Of the highest-rated applicants, it looks as though the St. Vrain Valley School District i3 project was the only one that would not receive credit, as it didn't meet the criteria for early learning at all. None of the readers granted the point.

But what about the others?

As a reminder, the Department of Education's definition for meeting the early learning priority requires applicants to focus on **all three** of the following: (See slide 20 from the Department of Education's Power Point for readers.)

1. improving young children's school readiness (including social, emotional, and cognitive readiness) so that children are prepared for success in core academic subjects;
2. improving developmental milestones and standards and aligning them with appropriate outcome measures; **and**
3. improving alignment, collaboration and transitions between early learning programs that serve children from birth to age three, in preschools and in kindergarten through third grade.

In thinking about these three focus areas, our interpretation, here at *Early Ed Watch*, is that these criteria require the inclusion of both early learning programs *before* and *after* kindergarten. This means projects beginning in kindergarten would not qualify nor would those that end before kindergarten. Only by including information on efforts to bridge the birth-to-five sphere and the K – 3rd sphere or by including a robust school-readiness component, would applicants accomplish the third area of focus and be eligible to earn the early learning competitive priority point. In other words, an initiative that only targets K-3rd children isn't enough.

That explains the lens we used to analyze the early learning grantees. And, we're not alone. [Based on what we've heard from the Department of Education during conference calls and speeches](#), our interpretation matches the department's goals.

Getting down to it: Our analysis found that just **one of three** scale-up proposals met the requirements (We talked about TFA in a previous post); **one of three** validation proposals met the requirements (and [Sara Mead at Ed Week has some questions about the one that has potential](#)); and **five of seven** development proposals met the requirements. So, while the Department boasts 13 early learning winners, we think the total is actually closer to seven.

(One caveat: *Early Ed Watch* has only reviewed the applicant's narratives, which is what's posted on the Department's website. Most applicants also attached information not yet released. So it's plausible that there are additional project details that we haven't read. It's also important to note that we are not saying these highest-rated projects are inferior to other proposals. We are attempting to call attention to what the applicants' plans include – and do not include – when it comes to early learning.)

We think some of the projects fell short in their support of early learning as defined in the application. Here's why:

- **ASSET's** proposal is a K-8 initiative that will assist schools to implement standards-based STEM education. The application mentioned plans to add pre-kindergarten after 2012, but there are no specifics on what the pre-k component would entail or how it would be aligned to the existing initiative. All three readers credited ASSET with meeting the competitive priority. One reader questioned waiting until 2012—ASSET did not include a reason. Without seeing the plans for the pre-k component, we cannot grant the competitive point.
- **The Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee's** development project focuses on improving the literacy of K-3 students and states the goal of "every student reading by third grade." This is certainly an important goal; however, the Boys and Girls Club could improve their effort by reaching children and families even earlier. And, by the way, even though the proposal made no mention of preschool, Reader #1 wrote, "project presents a means of articulation with programs for early learning—pre-k and primary grades." *Early Ed Watch* didn't see any sign of that, no points from us.
- **Utah State University's** validation study of the New Mexico K-3 Plus Program is another project that begins in the kindergarten year. K-3 Plus is a grant program that was established by the New Mexico legislature in 2007 and is designed to improve early literacy and numeracy, minimize summer learning loss and provide safe opportunities for disadvantaged children. Utah State University will conduct a multi-site randomized experiment to determine the program's effectiveness. As far as we could tell, eligible students are identified in pre-kindergarten, but the actual interventions start later. So, no points.

At first we were iffy as to whether or not the Los Angeles Unified School District's development proposal deserved the competitive point. LAUSD intends to hold an annual competition in which internal and external groups submit their operational and instructional plans to turn around low-performing schools or to create new schools to reduce overcrowding in low-performing schools. The district's application says that applicants will be required to include plans explaining how they would integrate early childhood education into their instructional programs and suggested that they collaborate with community early childhood education providers that feed into the selected elementary schools.

While we are glad that LAUSD is thinking about bridging early childhood education and the early grades – most districts haven't come this far – we are also hungry to know more about what the district wants applicants to do. (The [Early Education Initiative's recent Next Social Contract paper](#) could provide some ideas.) Is LAUSD looking for alignment of pre-kindergarten and K-3 standards? Joint planning or professional development opportunities for early childhood educators and the early grade teachers at the elementary schools where their students will likely attend? Collaborative efforts between early childhood programs and schools to ensure seamless transitions for children? Perhaps it wants to keep the door open for each of these possibilities and more, but it may need to provide some examples of what it is looking for.

Two out of the three readers gave LAUSD credit for meeting the priority. The one who didn't cited the need for more information. We decided that LAUSD did deserve the point because its proposal hits each of the three areas of focus, albeit briefly.

Again, some of these projects *do* look like promising and may likely have a positive impact on K-12 student learning. We'll be interested to follow them as we continue to follow i3. But are they "early learning" initiatives as defined by the department and many in the field? We don't think so because for the most part, children from birth to 4 are simply left out. We would've hoped to see more applicants and winners start their early learning efforts with children before they enter kindergarten.

Be sure to read Part 2 next week where *Early Ed Watch* takes a deeper look at some of the i3 winners that we believe most strongly meet the definition of early learning.

SUGGESTED READING

[Inconsistencies in Scores for i3's Early Learning Winners](#)
[Parsing the i3 Projects with a Focus on Early Learning](#)
[Seven Innovative Ideas for PreK-3rd Education: Will These Projects Be Funded?](#)
[Department of Education Announces the Investing In Innovation Grant Winners](#)
[Mining the Investing in Innovation Grant Data](#)

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