

Background

In 2015 and 2016, by providing small grants and technical support, the LISC Rhode Island Child Care and Early Learning Facilities Fund (RICCELFF) enabled 83 early learning centers across Rhode Island to dramatically improve the learning environments in their facilities. The grants, which totaled \$2.3 million, were made possible by the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, a U.S. Department of Education program designed to support high-quality early learning programs as well as increase the number of low-income and disadvantaged children who are enrolled in them.

The Challenge

A needs assessment conducted by RICCELFF in 2014, which included on-site visits to 58 randomly selected centers revealed that significant numbers of child care centers in Rhode Island face issues related to building conditions, safety, licensing and compliance, and overall facility quality. Furthermore, the study determined that it is much more likely for low-income children to be served in buildings that are in poor condition.

Well-designed facilities enhance child development and program quality, support expanding education programs, and can encourage enrollment and parent involvement. LISC understands the importance of ensuring that all families, particularly families in the most disadvantaged communities, have access to high quality early care and education programs. Research has shown that the earliest years of a child's development represent a critically important window of opportunity to develop a person's full potential and shape key academic, social, and cognitive skills that determine success in school and in life, with 90% of brain development occurring prior to age five. Economic studies have documented an annual rate of return of 13% on public investment in high-quality, early childhood programs through a reduced need for spending on other services, such as remedial education, grade repetition, and special education, as well as increased productivity, reduced rates of incarceration, and increased earnings for these children as adults.

The Outcomes

By providing \$2.3 million in grants as well as technical support, the RICCELFF enabled 83 early learning centers across Rhode Island to complete 114 projects. These projects made improvements to both indoor and outdoor spaces, including increasing natural light in indoor spaces, improving building security, reconfiguring/reducing student group sizes, correcting state licensing issues, and addressing health and safety concerns. The projects benefitted over 7,100 children in 28 cities and towns across Rhode Island.

"Today, our play space is everything we dreamed of. Our educators report children who are engaged, happy, learning, growing and thriving as they explore and play."
– Sara Meiwitz, Newport County YMCA



"Because of the careful planning and solid construction of this new playground, we now have the possibility of expanding the play centers available. We can now envision a future with play stations along the new fence and water elements and shade." – Cornerstone

"With funding from our partners at RI LISC and Children's Friend, we were able to excavate and construct a ramp that now provides a greater level of safety for the children in our care." – Genesis Center



"Each classroom now has plenty of natural lighting and provides a healthier atmosphere for our students. Our variance was removed and our license approved... Without the Race to the Top Grant funding, we would have had to close our doors." – Stork's Nest

"The impact of the LISC funds to improve the quality of our facilities, and, ultimately our program as a whole really jump started an even bigger project and vision for TCW Lincoln."
– Heather Grocott, Director, TCW Lincoln

Project Highlights

Beautiful Beginnings

Providence, Rhode Island

With \$51,000 in Race to the Top grants, a \$100,000 recoverable LISC construction grant, and 40 hours of technical assistance from LISC staff, Beautiful Beginnings was able to improve the safety and quality of its infant and preschool playgrounds by adding shade trees, removing unused wires, and installing a drainage system. Two of the classrooms were also expanded, bringing them into compliance with state licensing regulations.



The Children's Workshop

Lincoln, Rhode Island

With \$70,000 in Race to the Top grants, a \$7,500 LISC feasibility grant, a \$450,000 LISC construction loan, and 60 hours of technical assistance from LISC staff, the Lincoln Children's Workshop was able to increase its square footage by 30%, making room for 31 additional students. The layout of the center was reconfigured to ensure direct access to natural light, moving the center into compliance with state licensing regulations. The playground space was also enlarged and now includes new play activities.



Newport County YMCA Twice As Nice Preschool Middletown, Rhode Island

With \$57,000 in race to the Top grants, 60 hours of technical assistance from LISC staff, and a day of hands-on work from LISC AmeriCorps volunteers, Twice As Nice Preschool mitigated safety hazards on its playground and replaced unsafe and ineffective play equipment with a fully integrated natural playscape to better align with the program's mission, philosophy, and curriculum and increase accessibility for children with special needs.

While the centers supported by RICCELFF's Race to the Top grants achieved a lot in a very short amount of time, Rhode Island still has a long way to go to fix these problems. RICCELFF received nearly \$8 million in grant requests but was only able to fund \$2.3 million of them. Rhode Island LISC is actively raising funds in order to continue this work.