

Region 2 Podcast – New Jersey

Guests: Erika Kelley and Riddhi Parmar

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today we continue our regional story series looking at the innovative work being done in states and communities across the country with support from the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative. Host Rebecca Valenichis takes us to New Jersey where the state is using that support to advance its Early Childhood Integrated Data System. She speaks with two state leaders about their work and their recommendations for others across the country. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Rebecca Valenichis:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Rebecca Valenichis, an education researcher and technical assistant specialist with SRI Education. Today I'm very happy to be joined by Erika Kelley, who is a project sponsor and director of the New Jersey Council for Young Children and the founder of Sage Horizons, LLC. It's wonderful to have you here today, Erika.

Erika Kelley:

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Rebecca Valenichis:

We're also joined today by Riddhi Parmar, who is the NJ-EASEL business analyst with Mathtech for the New Jersey Department of Education. Welcome, Riddhi.

Riddhi Parmar:

Thank you, Rebecca. Happy to join here.

Rebecca Valenichis:

Excellent. Thank you both for making the time to talk with us today. We're so interested in hearing your story about how New Jersey has used their PDG B-5 funding to advance their Early Childhood Integrated Data System. So let's just dive right in and get started. For those who may not be familiar, can you explain what NJ-EASEL is?

Erika Kelley:

Absolutely. So to start off, NJ-EASEL stands for New Jersey Enterprise Analysis System for Early Learning. And NJ-EASEL, it's our ECIDS, so it's our Early Childhood Integrated Data System. And for those who may not be familiar, an ECIDS gathers, integrates, stores, and reports information from early childhood programs across multiple agencies within a state that serve children and families from prenatal to age eight. So for New Jersey's Early Childhood Integrated Data System, the goals for NJ-EASEL, we have four of them. The first one is to integrate data from our four partnering agencies. In New Jersey, early childhood doesn't just sit in one department per se, it's across different state departments. So our four partner agencies that we're integrating data from are the Department of Education, Department of Children and Families, Department of Human Services, and Department of Health.

The second goal is to answer critical questions about early care and education programs and services, again, for children, prenatal through age eight. The third one, which we really get excited about is the ability to produce reports to measure the collective impact of our cross-agency programs. And finally, another big goal is to use the reports to inform our administration of our programs and services, which are essential to the development and growth of our youngest children. So it'll be able to generate reports to help us to determine the quality of early care and education programs to be able to increase access to needed support services for children who are at risk and to have more equitable access to critical programs and services.

Rebecca Valenichis:

It does seem like this is dynamic, innovative, and essential work that you all are doing. So as a recipient of the PDG B-5 funding, what has the grant enabled you to do with NJ-EASEL that you wouldn't have been able to do otherwise?

Erika Kelley:

The biggest thing I would have to point out, as I mentioned, were integrating data from four partnering agencies. So the biggest thing that we've been able to accomplish through the grant is that cross-agency collaboration and really just that relationship-building. Prior to receiving grant funding, initially with our Race to the Top grant, a lot of the departments and we admit this that we were operating in silos. So with the Race to the Top grant, we were able to create a structure where we have an inter-department planning group, and that's made up of all the administrators from our state departments.

So through that initial grant and effort which started in 2014, we were able to, again, just start that relationship building, build that trust with one another to be able to be comfortable with sharing information. And so without the grant, the initial one, of course, Race to the Top, we wouldn't have been able to do that. And with the PDG B-5 funding, we were able to continue that. And one of the important things that we also did was, we developed a crosswalk of questions and objectives. And again, we talked about the critical questions that we have.

Riddhi Parmar:

So with the PDG B-5 grant, we were allowed to integrate more systems and more data to enhance NJ-EASEL. If I talk in the phase wise that NJ-EASEL was live with the phase one data in November 30, 2018. And when we went live, we integrated two system, one from Department of Education and one from Department of Human Services. So phase one, we went live with the education data and the child care subsidy data.

So with PDG B-5 grant, we were allowed to integrate two more system from two different agency, Department of Health and the Department of Children and Family. So without this grant, we would not have gone this far ahead where we are right now because integrating Department of Health and home visiting data is very critical for this project because it provides the true identity of children and data regarding the young children and prenatal conditions for children.

Erika Kelley:

And thank you, Riddhi. And just to give a little bit more context in terms of when we talk about relationship building, as the project sponsor and as the director of the New Jersey Council for Young Children, the New Jersey Council for Young Children, the data committee, because for us to actually do the work, were broken up into different committees. And so our data committee was the committee that actually came up with the questions that we talked about, which was the impetus for creating NJ-

EASEL and developing the crosswalk. And then the administrators that also sit on our inner department planning group, they're also on the council. So we're all connected and that's how we all work together.

Riddhi Parmar:

And when Erika said there are questions that were developed as a part of this grant, so just to give you an idea that there are 53 objectives and 11 question and there are section between children, programs, and workforce. So with phase one, we try to answer some of the questions, and now with phase two, we are ready to answer some of the program questions.

Rebecca Valenichis:

And so as you're thinking about the importance of collaboration and the importance of coordination, the importance of integration, talked about the phasing of the work. So what preliminary things did you have to do prior to the PDG B-5 funding that really set you up for success once the funds were available?

Erika Kelley:

Well, as I mentioned, of course, we had to set up our structure. So we have the inter-department planning group, and to make sure that there's a lot of cross-agency collaboration and also a connection with the New Jersey Council for Young Children. But one of the biggest things was creating our data-sharing agreements. Again, when we're integrating data from different systems, we can't just share this information, we had to create actual data-sharing agreements which actually grants us permission to be able to use the data from the different departments.

Riddhi Parmar:

So just to add to Erika, we had a strong process to creating data-sharing agreements and executing them. So we had a very defined data governance structure right there and then. And lot goes before we plan how do we integrate. Like, who's going to share data, how much limited data that are we allowed to use and manipulate? So after the data-sharing agreements were signed, we all agree we are on the same page that we are executing this project. So if I talk in terms of NJ-EASEL system-wise, what happens after once every agency is ready to share their data, we identify which data is helpful to answer the critical questions for children, families, and programs, and workforce and we prioritize the questions. Then based on the prioritization of question, we identify the system and the data. Once we integrate the data, we take it to the business intelligence reporting and those reports are being used by the IPG.

So with phase one, we decided to report on the New Jersey's children who are impacted by the social, emotional, and situational condition. So we received the data from Department of Education and Department of Human Services, and as phase one, we focused on young children and we created our reporting for that. So with phase two, we are finally integrating four agencies and we are getting young children's data from four different places, including their health data, including their family data. We decided to integrate the Department of Health data because that's where we got their true identity data and their health information. Also, we integrated data from Department of Children and Families, which is home visiting data, so we get more clarity on how the children's health were when they were born, starting from their prenatal age.

And for phase three, we are planning to go for workforce data and we want to analyze how the workforce is doing in New Jersey in terms of the program administrator, teachers, and what are their characteristics.

Erika Kelley:

As you can see, this work is very technical. And one of the other things that when we talk about what did we set up in terms of success for the project is making sure that our team is structured in a way so that we can work together seamlessly. And so we have two other members of our team who aren't able to be here with us today, but we have a senior project manager, Leslie Levey, in addition to Riddhi Parmar. And then we also have a project manager, Saurabh Dave, who the four of us together, we really lead this work. And without the other two team members, we wouldn't be able to have this successful project. So I can never go without always taking a moment to thank our amazing team.

Rebecca Valenichis:

Well, that's excellent that you're able to have that team dynamic and really kind of push this innovative work forward. So I know you've talked just a little bit about the different phases and kind of how you approach that and the integration of different departments and agencies at various points and kind of what that would do for the system. But is there an example or two that you both might be able to share that really kind of drives the impact that NJ-EASEL is having in your state?

Erika Kelley:

Absolutely. I think the biggest impact as I alluded to earlier, was our ability to produce reports to measure the collective impact of our cross-agency programs. And also using those reports to be able to inform our administration. When you think of New Jersey, while it may not seem like we're such a big state, but we can really be sectioned off into North, Central, South. So what happens in the North is very different from what happens in the South.

And typically what has happened over the years, when we think about grant funding that we've got federally funded grants, even our state-funded grants, a lot of the funding went to many, I guess, vulnerable areas. And typically they've been Newark, Camden, but one of the things that we've been able to see with our NJ-EASEL in the reports that there are other areas that are actually just as needy. They might be rural, further in the South like Cumberland County. And so when we think about making sure that our funds are distributed equitably, this is where data like this has been extremely helpful.

And then also when we think about preschool expansion, one of the biggest goals in New Jersey is to have universal preschool, but we have to do that in waves. So being able to look at the information that we have in our data, to be able to inform how we should actually roll out that preschool funding in different iterations, that is also been helpful.

Riddhi Parmar:

I just wanted to add one thing to Erika's description. So currently we are doing point-in-time reporting, but eventually the goal of the system to do the longitudinal study and research about the outcome of the data. So that's actually a path that we are approaching by adding more data in more phases.

Rebecca Valenichis:

Such an interesting way to be able to use the funding as well as to be able to then use the system to drive at programmatic reach and impact and services, and really kind of looking long term what's next and what can be done. So what is next for NJ-EASEL?

Erika Kelley:

Well, when I think about what's next, one of the things would be able to have for our end users to be part of the public. Right now, the way it's set up, our end users are a part of our inter-department planning group. And again, one of the things in New Jersey when I talked about the way it's separated, North, Central, South, we have different counties. Some of those counties are small. So when you think about the data that we have in the system, even though we have unidentifiable characters if it's such a small school district or a small county, one of the things that we stress and that is very important to us is privacy. So if there's a child that has an IEP or a different type of designation, we wouldn't want to be able to identify that child.

So over time, we hope that we'll be able to figure out how we can maintain the privacy to be able to allow the public to be able to access the system because we definitely think that the information would be helpful to them. Some of the things that we're looking at are maybe not drawing down the data so specifically, using a more summary approach as opposed to being so specific by school districts or counties, but that's one of the directions that we're looking to go into.

Riddhi Parmar:

And systematically talking, phase one we went live in 2018, and with phase two we are planning to go live in 2023. With using PDG B-5 funding, we are also using that money to enhance our phase one reports because every year we have to integrate data that's coming from different system, so that is a continuous process. And phase three, which is sometime planned in 2024, we are planning to integrate the staffing data, which is teachers and program administrator. And then going forward with phase four and five, we are planning to integrate remaining source system, which is part of NJ-EASEL and hopefully we'll have a continuation of the funding and we'll be able to successfully integrate all 14 system in NJ-EASEL.

Rebecca Valenichis:

So as you're thinking about where you've been and where you're looking to go and thinking about all of the work and effort that have been done to date, are there key pieces of advice or insights that you might offer to other states or stakeholders or some things that you would have liked to know at the beginning of this process?

Erika Kelley:

Absolutely. One of the things that we're really proud of in New Jersey again is our strong data governance and our structure. We've been fortunate, and again, we're so very proud that we've been invited to speak at different conferences nationally to talk about how we've set up our data-sharing agreements and what our data governance structure looks like. So a tip that I would recommend for any state that's looking to start a Early Childhood Integrated Data System is to be mindful and to build in the time to build those relationships and those cross-agency collaborations because it is so important.

And it took time, it wasn't something that we just said, okay, let's come together and this is what we're going to do. We really invested the time to build those relationships, and also the continuous stakeholder engagement. We were able to start this project again from the New Jersey Council for Young Children. So again, being able to make sure that all these parts are communicating to one another and that we're all aware of what the end goal is, and also just thinking about the different structure. We also have different committees, and so we have policy governance committee.

So again, I just think making sure that we have the right people at the table and spending the time to identify who those people are. Because a lot of times, I've seen where there's been projects that

have been rolled out, but you left a certain department out and now you rolled it out and now you have to go back and redo something. So I think having those initial folks involved from the beginning was really helpful.

Riddhi Parmar:

And systematically, I want to add one thing that to integrate the data from various agencies, various source system, and the biggest question that every project faces that what exactly we are trying to achieve. But for NJ-EASEL, the initial development of questions and objectives are the driver of this project. So those questions and objectives are our focus throughout the team and everyone thinks through those questions and objectives to be on the same page and it really helps in understanding that what are we integrating and why are we integrating. So that's a huge thing for anybody to develop this kind of a huge system integrating various data.

Erika Kelley:

Interestingly enough, a lot of states, they don't roll it out that way. Where we developed our questions and objectives first, some states actually develop the system and then try to figure out, okay, what data do we have? What answers to questions can we have? So they actually do it in the reverse. But we found, doing it with the questions first and being very focused and intentional really helped us.

Riddhi Parmar:

And even in the project management's perspective, that was huge because to be able to bring the team together and make sure everyone understand that what is the goal of this project, which is very helpful.

Rebecca Valenichis:

Well, extremely beneficial and valuable information shared from the two of you today for all states who are looking at doing an Early Childhood Integrated Data System. Erika Kelley, Riddhi Parmar from New Jersey, thank you both so much for sharing your experience and your knowledge. And we look forward to seeing all of the good things that are yet to come for NJ-EASEL and the children and families in New Jersey.

Erika Kelley:

Thank you again, Rebecca, for having us.

Riddhi Parma:

Thank you, Rebecca. It was wonderful to be part of this.

Narrator:

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