

# Using the Spectrum of Opportunities to Support Childhood Obesity Prevention In Early Care & Education Settings

Child and Adult Care Food Program



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### **Thanks to the following authors for their contributions to the case studies:**

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Kevin Cataldo  
Katey Halaz  
Alex Hyman  
Roshelle Payes  
Kelly Schaffer  
Julie Shuell

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Caliste Chong, Julie Odom & Gail Piggot, Alabama Partnership for Children  
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Rebekah Duchette, Kentucky Cabinet for Health & Family Services  
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Emily Keenum & Kathy Glazer, Virginia Early Childhood Foundation

# National Early Care and Education Learning Collaboratives (ECELC) Integration of Childhood Obesity Prevention into State/Local ECE Systems

## Executive Summary and Overview as of July 2017

### National ECELC

Launched fall 2012, the National Early Care and Education Learning Collaborative (ECELC) is a six-year, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-funded effort, implemented by Nemours and partners. ECELC was designed to prevent childhood obesity through the spread of impactful, sustainable policy and practice improvements in the early care and education (ECE) setting with respect to healthy eating, physical activity, breastfeeding and screen time (HEPA).

The ECELC project partners with organizations in states and communities to 1) provide an intensive ‘learning collaborative’ obesity prevention intervention to groups of center and home-based ECE providers (child care, Head Start, pre-kindergarten), and 2) better integrate national obesity prevention standards<sup>1</sup> and implementation support for these standards into components of state and local ECE systems.

As of July 2017, eight states (Alabama, Arizona, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Virginia, and New Jersey) and four communities (North/Central Florida, South Florida, Los Angeles County California, Contra Costa County California) have participated in the National ECELC. The intervention<sup>1</sup> typically consists of five in-person learning sessions spread over a 10-month period, ongoing technical assistance for participating ECE providers, and access to tools, materials and resources.

*Childhood obesity is a national epidemic and obesity prevention is an increasing focus for states supporting the healthy development of young children. Studies have shown that in the United States, approximately 23% of children ages 2 to 5 years old are overweight or obese.*

*Source: Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Kit BK, Flegal KM. Prevalence of Childhood and Adult Obesity in the United States, 2011-2012. JAMA. 2014;311(8):806-814.*

### Integrating Obesity Prevention into ECE Systems Using CDC’s Framework

Through this project, partners worked intentionally to understand the extent to which support for standards has been integrated into components of their ECE system. Assisted by technical assistance from Nemours, partners used the CDC’s ‘Spectrum of Opportunities for Obesity Prevention in the ECE Setting’ as a framework to identify gaps and opportunities for further integration and, working with broad internal stakeholder groups, select and pursue integration action steps. Integration efforts spread awareness of standards and build upon the main objectives of ECELC—increase number of ECE programs meeting standards, and increase the proportion of young children in programs that meet these standards.

Many factors influence how and when integration of best practice support into ECE systems can be achieved. This case study series explores some of



Figure 1: CDC Spectrum of Opportunities.

the integration opportunities pursued by each state/community, the outcomes of these efforts, and factors that may have hindered or enhanced their success. The uniqueness of each state or local ECE system (e.g., licensing, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), stakeholder groups) is described as an important contextual factor for integration activities.

## Development and Purpose of State Case Studies

In fall 2016, Nemours gathered information from its ECELC partners, reviewed monthly progress and integration plans, and compiled case studies describing each partner's integration efforts. Reports for several states/communities and reports by Spectrum area were completed in July 2017 and posted on [www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org](http://www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org).<sup>2</sup> These case studies provide real-life examples of how partners have leveraged initiatives (i.e. ECELC), funding, stakeholder engagement, and other factors to integrate HEPA practices/activities into ECE systems. The reports discuss how federal funding streams/initiatives (e.g., CACFP, Child Care Development Fund, State Public Health Actions—1305) are leveraged in a variety of ways *alongside* state or local resources to achieve integration activities across the Spectrum. Case studies serve multiple purposes: reflection, information sharing, and planning.

**Reflection.** Development of case study reports provided an opportunity for National ECELC partners to reflect on their pathway, progress, key challenges and lessons learned. This also allowed reflection on what was accomplished, how it was achieved and who was involved. All partners continue their integration activities and case studies will be updated as needed.

**Information sharing.** Case study reports provide valuable information at multiple levels. In the participating state or community, the case study may be a communication tool for partners' information sharing with stakeholders. For other participating ECELC states or communities, they provide an opportunity to learn about the impact driven by participation in the National ECELC project. For stakeholders in non-ECELC states and communities, the case studies are an opportunity to learn how others have integrated HEPA into ECE systems.

**Planning.** For National ECELC partners, their case study reports may help to serve as a planning tool for continued improvement and momentum. By reflecting on challenges and lessons learned, partners can celebrate the successes while focusing on filling gaps and continuing to integrate ECE obesity prevention efforts. For states and communities that have not participated in ECELC but are working on childhood obesity prevention via state or local ECE systems, case study reports provide a roadmap for possible change. Case study reports from those that have traveled a similar journey will help others consider a systems perspective for integration from the beginning.

The ECELC case study series explores some of the integration opportunities pursued by each state and community, the outcomes of these efforts, and factors that may have hindered or enhanced their success. Integration activities are characterized by their primary focus within the Spectrum of Opportunities. This summary report describes information learned, reflections, and recommendations from across the case studies.

## Summary of Obesity Prevention Integration Activities Across States and Communities

Over the course of their participation in the National ECELC project, partners pursued integration activities across the Spectrum of Opportunities. Certain areas have risen to the top among partners' work. In particular, pre-service and professional development, licensing and administrative regulations, and QRIS. Many partners' activities touched multiple areas of the Spectrum of Opportunities despite being characterized under one primary area. The most prominent areas for each state or community are highlighted in their report.

The following summarizes partner activities within each area of the Spectrum of Opportunities. Additional detail about each area is available in the *Spectrum of Opportunities State Integration Highlights* reports, available at [www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org](http://www.healthykidshealthyfuture.org).

## Pre-Service and Professional Development

Pre-service and Professional Development was the area of the Spectrum of Opportunities most frequently leveraged by partners participating in the National ECELC. Eight out of ten used Pre-service and Professional development to integrate HEPA activities. Partners in Arizona and Kentucky created *online modules aligned to HEPA standards*, and in Kentucky technical assistance packages accompany those modules and enhance trainers' ability to support ECE programs to make changes. Other partners created *new trainings* to meet needs identified by ECE providers or stakeholders. For example, an infant/toddler feeding training was developed in Indiana, and parent trainings in Los Angeles.

The *development of toolkits* was another commonly used strategy to help large numbers of ECE providers make and sustain HEPA changes. In Los Angeles partners developed a Breastfeeding Friendly Child Care Toolkit, and Indiana partners created a Family Engagement Toolkit which is now an online module for ECE providers. Similarly, the partner in New Jersey developed *Policy Packets and Kits* to help give ECE providers the tools and language needed to make HEPA changes in their programs. In Virginia, *'supply kits'* were provided to technical assistance providers to share with ECE providers to encourage them to focus on HEPA changes.

Many partners that focused on Pre-service and Professional Development as an integration strategy strived to *ensure that continuing education units (CEUs) and licensing clock hours/in-service hours were available for ECE providers* participating in the learning collaboratives and in new and existing HEPA trainings.

## Licensing and Administrative Regulations

Five partners focused on Licensing and Administrative Regulations as a primary integration strategy. In Kentucky, Los Angeles, CA, Missouri, and New Jersey this centered on *promoting the inclusion of HEPA standards in licensing regulations*. In each of the states, the effort is ongoing; it is a lengthy administrative process to update licensing regulations. Arizona has a highly visible HEPA initiative (Empower) in place tied to state licensing regulations and the *National ECELC was co-branded* to align with the program as Empower PLUS+. The partner in Arizona leverages licensing and QRIS support and *aligns training and data collection* for a coordinated strategy to support the achievement of HEPA practices in ECE settings. In California, stakeholders *built upon legislation that requires new licensed providers participating in Preventive Health and Safety Practices (PHSP) Training to receive a 1-hour training on child nutrition*. Partners aligned curricula and existing training with the new child nutrition training to ensure providers are up-to-date with current information.

## Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

Five partners in Indiana, Kansas, Los Angeles, CA, New Jersey and South Florida, focused on QRIS as a primary integration strategy. Partners in these states have *engaged with stakeholders—public and private—to leverage the reach and potential of QRIS to weave HEPA topics into broader quality improvement strategies*. Four of the five partners that focused on QRIS did so from the perspective of *integrating HEPA standards into QRIS, either through the launch of a new QRIS or revisions to an existing QRIS*. In New Jersey, the partner successfully *included a HEPA-focused self-assessment (Let's Move! Child Care) in the state's QRIS*. In three of these states, South Florida, Kansas, and New Jersey—as well as Virginia<sup>3</sup>—the partner made efforts to *train QRIS technical assistants* to enhance their ability to assist ECE programs in their efforts to achieve HEPA best practice standards.

## Emerging Opportunities

Emerging opportunities do not fit neatly into any one area of the Spectrum and are often unique. Partners in Arizona, Indiana, North/Central Florida and South Florida are pursuing emerging opportunities for integration. In South Florida, stakeholders partnered with Help Me Grow<sup>4</sup> and YMCA of South Florida to further *integrate obesity prevention into existing systems and to promote consistent obesity prevention messages* to ECE programs and families across South Florida. In North/Central Florida and Indiana, partners collaborated with Head Start grantees to successfully *modify the National ECELC approach to meet the specific needs of Head Start programs*. The approach in Arizona focused extensively on the partner leveraging multiple avenues to elevate obesity prevention across the state system—from the state level to ECE provider-level change.

## Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

Partners in Missouri and Virginia are using CACFP as a primary integration strategy. In Missouri, the state's existing CACFP recognition program *Eat Smart* and *MOve Smart*, was aligned to the National ECELC around *messaging and supports*. *Eat Smart*, in particular, focuses on supporting ECE programs to meet nutrition standards, including CACFP for those meeting more advanced standards. The National ECELC project helped *to add bandwidth through learning collaboratives to provide technical assistance to help ECE programs implement best practice nutrition standards and receive recognition*.

The partner in Virginia is similarly focused on *expanding the bandwidth of technical assistance, and in particular state CACFP and Infant Toddler Specialists, to assist ECE providers in their efforts to meet or exceed HEPA standards*. Stakeholders in Virginia held a *CACFP Summit* that resulted in the formation of workgroups to address barriers to ECE provider enrollment in CACFP and how these barriers can be overcome so that more eligible providers will participate.

## Technical Assistance

Two partners (in Kansas and Virginia) focused on Technical Assistance as a primary integration activity.<sup>5</sup> The partner in Kansas *collaborated with stakeholders to enhance the collective capacity* to increase healthy lifestyles in ECE. They supported a stakeholder initiative by *providing technical assistance for ECE programs to complete HEPA assessments and plan for change*. In Virginia, HEPA is incorporated into a variety of technical assistance supports. Technical assistance strategies accompanied implementation of a CDC-funded Go NAP SACC pilot, a “Rev Your Bev” campaign to engage children 0-5 in healthy lifestyles, as well as implementation of a breastfeeding friendly child care environments initiative.

## Family Engagement

The partner in Kentucky was the only one that had integration activities that fell primarily in the Family Engagement area of the Spectrum. In Kentucky, there is an active 5-2-1-0 campaign to educate families on healthy, active living for young children. With 1305 funds, the state partner *developed a train the trainer course for ECE credentialed trainers to support their ability to deliver a 2-hour 5-2-1-0 training to ECE providers and families*. A similar online training on how to use 5-2-1-0 with parents was also developed.

Although the partner in Kentucky was the only to focus on Family Engagement as a primary integration strategy, others implemented changes that included family engagement but might have had a more prominent focus in a different area of the Spectrum. For example, the state partner in Indiana developed a self-assessment tool for ECE programs, *Indiana Early Childhood Family Engagement Toolkit* to help programs understand their current level of engagement and how they can improve practices and policies to engage families. The tool was initially implemented as part of the National ECELC project and was integrated into each learning session to bridge HEPA topics with family engagement strategies.

## Exploring Challenges and Lessons Learned

When looking across states it becomes apparent that the challenges and lessons partners experience while working toward integration activities are quite similar and fall into the following categories:

### Pace

Partners find that changes to the ECE system—most notably QRIS and licensing regulations—take significant time. The pace of change is slow due to administrative processes, changing priorities, staff turnover or other factors that cause delays in finalizing and implementing revised systems.

### Navigating funding streams

Funding can be a barrier to change, and partners experience this from multiple perspectives. There is no dedicated funding stream for HEPA program improvement in ECE. Often partners have to seek grant funding to support integration activities or fight for public funds for HEPA versus other program improvement areas. Other funding-related challenges include having to weave together multiple funding sources to support integration activities, balancing the uncertainty of state budgets and the longevity of funded projects. Partners also depend on funding to maintain momentum and struggle to enhance existing initiatives with static funding.



## Creating change within voluntary systems

As it relates to QRIS or other voluntary statewide initiatives (e.g., Arizona’s Empower program) partners have had to consider the depth of impact within voluntary systems. In some states, the QRIS reaches only a small number of ECE providers. In other states, exemptions to licensing requirements mean many ECE providers operate outside the regulatory system. With a focus on encouraging implementation of best practice HEPA standards across all ECE settings, some partners have had to balance that expectation with what is feasible within the existing systems.

## Coordination among multiple partners or stakeholders

In many states multiple projects, initiatives, stakeholder groups, or public and private entities touch the ECE system and childhood obesity prevention. Creating shared goals and a coordinated path forward is a challenge for some partners, and particularly those that did not have an active ECELC stakeholder group or other group of key individuals already with buy-in and focused on creating an aligned strategy.

## Staff and leadership turnover

When staff who were deeply involved in a particular effort left their position there were periods of having to restart collaborations or reconfirm priorities and paths forward. This also proved true with turnover at the state leadership level. Changes in administration and the political climate within a state may translate into changes in statewide priorities or funding allocations.

## Technical assistance resources

Many of the integration efforts focus on *Spectrum of Opportunities* areas where technical assistance resources are available. For example, partners may access information about state licensing regulations and language for HEPA standards. They are also able to get ideas of how to build and integrate HEPA areas into QRIS. At the same time, there are few resources available on building new technical assistance networks or strategies to train existing networks not already knowledgeable on HEPA.

## Course correction

As partners work toward integration activities, it is not uncommon to change course. A variety of factors (e.g., stakeholder buy-in, leadership priorities, staffing, funding) impact the degree to which partners were able to maintain course on particular strategies. Maintaining flexibility and adaptability have proven important factors for successfully integrating HEPA into state systems. Similarly, many partners targeted ‘easy wins’ alongside bigger, more challenging changes. This allowed them to celebrate successes while simultaneously navigating the course to more significant (and often time-consuming and more resource driven) changes to the ECE system.

## Reflections and Recommendations

When considering the factors that contributed to partners’ success integrating HEPA activities into ECE systems, a few themes emerged. The partners themselves agree that these are the roadblocks encountered and paths forward. The following recommendations lay out suggested steps for consideration on the journey to fully integrate HEPA best practices into ECE systems.

### **Recommendation 1: Establish a system to become aware of new or unexplored funding opportunities and have an ability to respond to opportunities when they arise.**

Successful partners had an ability to respond to external opportunities when they presented themselves. This is particularly evident related to funding, whether to expand the reach of provider level initiatives (e.g., North/Central Florida leveraging 1305 fund collaboratives in an underserved region), launch new programs (e.g., South Florida’s Early Childhood Education Structured Physical Activity (ECESPA) project), campaigns (e.g. Kentucky’s 5-2-1-0) or training. Continuously re-scan the environment to determine if there are new or unexplored opportunities.

**Recommendation 2: Maintain flexibility with integration pathways and understand priorities, timing, and potential roadblocks.**

The timing of external opportunities played an important role in partners' ability to create change. In states or communities where certain systems-level changes were already in process, for instance revisions to QRIS or licensing regulations, partners took advantage of the opportunity to weave HEPA into existing change efforts. Given the complexity and time required to update QRIS standards and/or licensing regulations, leaders can only make significant headway when there is already momentum towards revision. This was also true when certain strategies (e.g. licensing) may have been politically sensitive and a non-starter in certain political climates.

**Recommendation 3: Be strategic about convening and using a stakeholder group and maintaining relationships with key individuals and organizations.**

Convening and using a stakeholder group—whether tapping into an existing group or forming a new one—can serve important purposes, including enhancing buy-in, understanding stakeholders' priorities, aligning efforts, highlighting potential roadblocks, and identifying cross-sector opportunities for integration. Convene a stakeholder group and maintain strong relationships outside of the stakeholder group. Given at times slow pace of change and turnover in staff positions, it is possible for integration planning to hit roadblocks. Focus on relationship building because work may not sustain if and when key individuals or change-leaders leave an organization.

**Recommendation 4: Manage planning, expectations of stakeholders, and communication with providers with respect to the pace of change.**

The at-times slow pace of change, particularly related to QRIS and licensing regulations, proved challenging for partners. To the extent possible, manage expectations with stakeholders and providers about the pace of change, and plan accordingly for delays in development or implementation of updated systems. Acknowledge with stakeholders that many integration activities are ongoing and take time. Stakeholders should remain advocates for change throughout the process, and in particular, when there are changes in leadership or staff that may require a 're-start' on aspects of integration pathways. In other cases, it might be necessary need to wait for the right timing, buy-in, or funding to address particular integration activities. Be aware of those factors from the beginning and plan accordingly.

**Recommendation 5: Determine from the onset where change takes place and put the appropriate resources and people in place to support the effort.**

When planning integration activities, determine which stakeholder(s) is in the best position to lead the work. The type of organization may help or hinder integration activities. For example, in some cases a state agency may be the best fit given administrative oversight of key systems, whereas in other instances a private stakeholder may be better suited to advocate for change needed within a state agency. This ties back to the importance of having a dedicated stakeholder group that can identify the best champion(s) for integration activities and having the right people/agencies at the table to support change. Regardless of where changes is taking place within the system, have a person focused on policy change and navigating the 'pre-work' to ensure proper procedures and timelines are followed.

## **Looking Ahead—A Continued Focus on Integration**

By using the case studies to understand and learn from the unique journey of states and communities in the National ECELC project, others interested in implementing the National ECELC model or a similar initiative can establish an integration pathway from the onset. Case studies share real-life examples of integration activities. While state infrastructure, stakeholders, funding, priorities, and context differ from state to state, themes emerging from case studies help to paint a picture of how to successfully integrate HEPA into systems. Case studies showcase that variety and highlight the pathways partners traveled as they worked to integrate HEPA into their ECE systems.

Integration activities are evolving and ongoing, and thus, the National ECELC case study reports will be updated in the future to reflect new ideas, activities, and accomplishments. There is opportunity for continued learning and improvements in system building for National ECELC partners as they reflect on their own journey and the journeys of their peers.



## Integration Highlights: *Child and Adult Care Food Program*

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal program that provides funding reimbursement for meals and snacks served to low-income children in early care and education (ECE) settings. Participating ECE programs follow CACFP standards regarding meal patterns in portions. Many states provide training or technical assistance to ECE providers related to CACFP, and some use CACFP as a guide for licensing regulations, quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) standards, or other state-based programs. In 2016, new CACFP standards were released. These new standards go into effect October 1, 2017 providing an opportunity and increased need for training and supports from states to ECE providers on implementation of nutrition best practices before this implementation deadline.

As defined in the *Spectrum of Opportunities for Obesity Prevention in the Early Care and Education Setting (ECE)*, *CDC Technical Assistance Briefing Document*, there are three primary ways states can use CACFP to help promote healthy eating and decrease obesity in young children in ECE<sup>6</sup>:

1. **Providing CACFP training and technical assistance** focused on nutrition, breastfeeding, physical activity, and screen time education for children, teachers and parents;
2. **Enhancing state CACFP standards to align with other national nutrition guidelines** such as the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans if they do not already; and
3. **Providing information** on how to increase CACFP participation among facilities.



Figure 3: Areas of Focus within the CDC Spectrum of Opportunities

Among the 10 states/regions participating in the National Early Care and Education Learning Collaborative (ECELC) project from 2013-2017, two have focused on CACFP as one of their primary strategies to integrate obesity prevention into state systems: **Missouri and Virginia**. Highlights of these states' efforts are provided below, and additional detail is available in each state's *Case Study for Integrating Obesity Prevention into State ECE Systems*.

Missouri and Virginia's efforts, though different, illustrate the importance of cross-agency and sector collaboration to support ECE programs in their implementation of best practice nutrition standards.

### *Missouri: Aligned ECELC Curriculum with State Initiatives to Support ECE Programs to Meet Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA) Best Practices*

Child Care Aware of Missouri (CCAMO), the National ECELC state implementation partner, aligned the ECELC learning curriculum with the *Eat Smart/MOve Smart* program and branding, which helped expand those programs' reach and certification throughout the state. *Eat Smart* was developed by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) to address the eating habits of young children in ECE settings, and includes nutrition guidelines at three levels: minimum, intermediate, and advanced. Providing support for programs participating in CACFP is an integral aspect of the initiative. Through the National ECELC project, CCAMO provided ECE staff with strategies, resources, and technical assistance that helped them to achieve improvements in their policies and practices. These improvements would also enable programs to meet *Eat Smart/MOve Smart* guidelines and achieve state certification. CCAMO helped DHSS promote their program and reach ECE sites across the state that may not have been able to participate in the effort due to the agency's limited bandwidth

and resources to provide technical assistance. Staff from DHSS and Cooperative Extension have also presented at ECELC Learning Sessions to orient participating ECE staff on the nutrition, physical activity, and breastfeeding support programs and incentives for being certified. Connecting these initiatives was mutually beneficial to CCAMO and DHSS. ECE programs viewed ECELC learning collaboratives as part of a broader statewide effort, instead of duplicative.

*Virginia: Held a CACFP Summit and Worked Toward Improved Nutrition for More Communities*

In fall 2014 the ECELC Project Coordinator from the Virginia Early Learning Foundation (VELF), National ECELC state implementation partner, and Virginia Department of Health (VDH) Director of Community Nutrition met to discuss how Virginia's ECELC project, CACFP and WIC intersect, and how strengthening these connections might be advantageous to childhood obesity prevention across the state. CACFP federal funding limits state agency activities to monitor and provide compliance training for participants. ECE programs participating in the ECELC project often request help developing acceptable menus that exceed CACFP nutrition guidelines, and it was discussed how VDH might help address this need. Thus, VDH applied for a USDA Team Nutrition grant to expand the bandwidth of the state CACFP staff to provide training and technical assistance. VDH applied to train CACFP providers on new meal patterns and to develop HEPA standards that could be woven into Virginia's child care licensing regulations. Although the application wasn't funded, it spurred a conversation between cross sector partners on the need for HEPA standards for ECE.

As a next step, VECF spearheaded a CACFP Summit in June 2016 with participation from a variety of state agencies and stakeholders. The summit resulted in the formation of workgroups to address barriers to ECE provider enrollment in CACFP and how these can be overcome so that more eligible providers will participate. The workgroups are also looking at how CACFP participation can improve the quality of nutrition to more communities with low-income children and families.

**REFERENCES FOR: *National Early Care and Education Learning Collaboratives (ECELC)***  
***Integration of Childhood Obesity Prevention into State/Local ECE Systems***

1. Aligned with the Preventing Childhood Obesity (2nd ed.) standards (CFOC3/PCO), included in *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs*, (3rd ed.).
2. Case studies were written for Arizona, North/Central Florida, South Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Virginia, and New Jersey. For the purpose of the summary, there are 10 states/regions highlighted which include Los Angeles, CA. Alabama is in the preliminary stages of integrating HEPA in to its state system and thus not included in this report. Contra Costa, CA did not include integration work in their ECELC activities.
3. In Virginia, the state partner's activities fall primarily into the Pre-Service and Professional Development area of the Spectrum.
4. Help Me Grow is a national initiative that helps to identify children at-risk for developmental or behavioral disabilities and connects children and families with community-based programs for health-related services. In South Florida, Help Me Grow is administered by Switchboard Miami.
5. Other states' strategies included a focus on technical assistance (TA) as part of other change strategies. For example, TA offered as part of a new initiative or to accompany trainings or use of toolkits.
6. Spectrum of Opportunities for Obesity Prevention in the Early Care and Education Setting (ECE), CDC Technical Assistance Briefing Document: <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/spectrum-of-opportunities-obesity-prevention.pdf>

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